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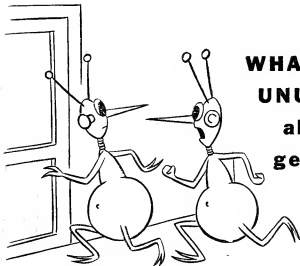
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THE TREND OF S-F MOVIES—

Would you care to gripe with me about a development that is eminently gripe-able? Good!

The subject may not be spanking new, but it is certainly timely. To wit: motion picture company advertisements for their current crop of science-fiction movies.

Let's grant certain things first. One is that the movie public is not hep to science-fiction; they have to be pre-sold, sold, and sold again. And you don't do it by citing the writer's name, or by getting technical. You do it by offering them a titillating hour of things that go bump in the night, all toggled out in special effects. The result: a plethora of "creatures" from here, there and yonder.

But now they are going too far. Seriously. Because now what they are doing is taking good science-fiction and making it seem either juvenile, sadistic, or sexually perverted. As an example I quote you some excerpts from the advertising for a critically well-received film called "The Fly." Briefly, the story concerns an electronics experimenter who accidentally exchanges heads with a housefly; the bulk of the film concerns his piteous efforts to get through to his friends and to his wife, and to instruct them how to un-do the damage. But here are the ads:

"The fly that was buzzing around the house had once been her loving husband!"

"The first time atomic mutation on human beings has been shown on the screen!"

"It challenges the supreme power of the universe!"

"Terror-color!"

And the illustration, of course, shows a sexy babe in a negligee cowering before a snaggle-toothed b.e.m.

A good guess would be that such a sales pitch would keep away from the theater more folks than it would attract. It certainly isn't building good-will for or interest in science-fiction. It just isn't doing any good at all for the newly-respectable world of s-f.

★ By the way, I'd like to share a bit of good news with you. As you may have noticed, we've frankly been experimenting, in the past, with varying numbers of pages in *Amazing*. But your response has been so hearty in recent months that we've decided to keep each issue from now on a jam-packed 144 pages—more (and, we hope, ever better) reading for your money.—NL

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THE BLONDE FROM SPACE

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

When the beautiful emissary from Coltura arrived, all the Earth was captured by her charm—or was it the other way around?

THE skies of Mars were feverish. On the brow of the copper hills that ringed the spaceship, the fiery glare was so intense that Captains Warner and Carey cringed before the blinding light. Gig Warner succumbed first, dropping to his knees on the hot sandy soil. His friend and companion came to his aid, screwing his eyes shut against the awful light, trying to help him to his feet. "Johnny! Johnny!" Gig groaned, hating his own infirmity. "What the hell's happening? What's going on?"

"I don't know," John Carey gasped. "I feel terrible . . . so weak . . ."

"Got to get back to the ship . . . radio . . ."

"Wait," Carey panted. "Think it's fading now . . ."

The skies were showing mercy

at last. The monstrous, blinding fire was dimming in the heavens; the copper-colored hills softening in intensity. The two men sobbed in relief, and slowly, painfully, began struggling back towards the ship. Then, with sanctuary only yards away, the light returned, this time blue and cold and even more terrifying, brighter than before, filling them with alien dread and superstitious awe.

Then the Mirage came.

Gig Warner saw it first, and emitted a shriek of mingled horror and ecstasy, lifting his arm feebly towards the misty shape forming before their eyes. Captain Carey saw it, too, and stared in disbelief at the sight.

"It's a woman!" he said hoarsely. "So help me God, it's a woman . . ."

"Beautiful," Gig Warner whis-

pered. "Beautiful, beautiful . . ." He began to laugh, and the sound echoed brassily among the hills. "Most beautiful woman I ever saw . . ." He tried to get to his feet, his face contorted.

"No! No," Carey said, trembling before the giant visage. "Mirage, Gig," he mumbled. "Some kind of mirage . . ."

"Beautiful!" Gig Warner screamed, rising from the hot sand and waving his arms towards the creature of the mists. "Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful . . ."

He began to run, stumbling over the shifty, treacherous sands. Carey started after him, shouting, and then no longer cared what happened to his friend. He looked up at the incredible vision overhead, and saw the deep violet eyes of the Thing, filled with tenderness and compassion. He smiled.

Fifty yards away, Gig Warner, babbling, dropped to the ground and nestled his cheek into the dune, feeling a sense of peace.

Then John Carey, still smiling, sank to his knees and began toying idly with the sand.

They were the first men on the planet Mars. And they were mad.

Major Kevin Chumm had a reputation for bluntness, and it preceded him even into the anti-septic halls of the Rickover Military Hospital. There was a wariness about the hospital officials who greeted him; many were surprised to find that he was such a personable young man.

One of the Army nurses did a bit of casual flirting, and got a taste of Major Chumm's temper.

"Never mind the fun and games," he said testily. "Just take me to Captain Warner."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, Major." The nurse, flustered, patted the curls under her cap. "Our orders are positive. Neither Captain Warner or Captain Carey are permitted visitors."

"I'm superseding your orders," Kevin snapped. "Now will you show me Captain Warner's room, or do I have to get nasty?"

The nurse looked bewildered. A passing official caught her unspoken plea for help, and paused. After a few minutes conversation, he succumbed either to Major Chumm's blunt charm, or his air of authority.

"All right, nurse," he said. "Major Chumm can see Captain Warner, but only for a few minutes."

"Thanks," Kevin said gruffly.

He followed the nurse down the hall, a lanky figure in the heavy boots of the space command, his brooding eyes fixed on the polished floor. When he entered the room in the hospital's psychiatric wing, he heard the click of the lock behind him.

Captain Gig Warner was in a wheel chair, looking out of a barred window. He wore a hospital bathrobe.

"Gig," Kevin said softly.

Warner didn't turn around.

"Gig, it's me. What did they do to you?"

Kevin stepped closer. He



The crazed woman aimed well. Areesa crumpled to the ground.

touched the captain's shoulder, but felt no response.

"What did you see up there, Gig? What happened to you and Johnny?"

"The light, the light, the light," Warner mumbled. "My name is Gig Warner, space command. Beautiful, beautiful . . ."

Major Chumm winced.

"It's all right, Gig. Everything's going to be okay now. We're going to take care of you."

"Johnny . . . Johnny . . . do you see? Beautiful, beautiful . . ."

"Easy, Gig."

"Beautiful," Warner giggled. "So beautiful, Johnny . . ."

Kevin turned his face away. Then he walked to the door, and hammered on the window panel until it was unlocked.

In the offices of Dr. Kris Borenson, chief of the psychiatric division, Major Chumm asked:

"What's the prognosis, Doctor?"

Borenson sighed.

"At first, we believed both men suffered some traumatic shock. We tried to bring them back to reality, with shock treatments of our own, but they've failed utterly. We're forced to face the fact that their sanity has been totally destroyed; there isn't even a shred of rationality left. We're dealing with something beyond our earthly experience now, Major; it's like no psychosis we have ever encountered . . ."

"But what about the second Mars ship? The men who found

Walker and Carey? Nothing happened to them."

"No, nothing. We can't explain that, either."

"These things he keeps saying. Does it mean anything to you?"

"Nothing whatever. Both men repeat the same absurdities, over and over. Whatever they saw, whatever they felt, it was an experience involving something they call "beautiful." He grunted. "It's a high price to pay for beauty, Major."

"Too high," Kevin said gloomily.

The gloominess stayed with Kevin Chumm when he left Rickover Hospital and returned to BOQ at the space command field in Pawling. But it was more than the plight of his fellow officers that was troubling him—it was guilt. A year ago, he had been one of the dozen men who had trained rigorously for the two-man trip to Mars, an assignment coveted by every member of the space command. One by one, the eliminations had taken place, until the choice had narrowed down to Gig Warner, John Carey, and himself. It had seemed like a foregone conclusion that Major Chumm would be elected: his keenness of mind, his physical vigor, his intensity of spirit had made him the most likely candidate for the job. There was a gambler's pool in the barracks of the command post, and the odds had it all in favor of Kevin Chumm, with John Carey a close second.

Then the accident happened. It was stupid; it was unforgivable; it was bitter disappointment. A routine space flight between Earth and the Moon, piloted by Major Chumm; a moment of recklessness that cost the ship its landing equipment; a brilliant but damaging landing on a makeshift runway; a broken arm that never knit in time for the scheduled rendezvous with the red planet.

Kevin hated himself every time he thought of it. *He* should have co-piloted that first Mars ship. *He* should have put his boots on the sands of Mars, not Gig Warner. And *he* should have been the hollow-eyed figure in the wheel chair by the barred window of the Rickover Hospital...

Kevin felt guilty. But being human, he felt relieved, too. And the relief made him hate himself all the more.

"I'll find out, Gig," he whispered to himself. "I'll find out what they did to you..."

In five months, the third Mars expedition would be preparing to explore the planet. And Major Kevin Chumm, his arm healed and usable, would be in command.

But something else intervened; something more unexpected than a broken bone.

Three weeks before the date of rendezvous with Mars, the first interstellar message was received on Earth.

At first, it seemed to be nothing

more than a wild rumor which spread from city to nation to continent. There were vigorous denials from the major world capitals; there was a blanket of secrecy which dropped heavily over all facts. The hope of finding intelligence within the scope of Earth had long since been abandoned by science. They had searched the Moon, and found nothing but silent rock. They had visited Mars, and seen nothing but sand and copper hills. Their telescopes, freed from the distortion of Earth's atmosphere, had scanned the terrains of Mercury and Venus, and found no sign of living things. They had been convinced that Earth was the only source of life in the solar system and beyond, and that Man would be forever alone in the cosmos.

But now the rumors were spreading—rumors of a voice heard in the great radio receivers of the space command, of signals from another star, another race.

Major Kevin Chumm was one of the first to learn that the rumors were true.

Along with a dozen other officers of the command, he was called into emergency session. In a briefing room, General Curtis Van Damme himself took the lecture.

"Gentlemen," he said. "The stories are genuine. We *have* been contacted from outer space."

It took a long moment to silence the buzzing assembly.

"We're as amazed and bewildered as you are now. We've checked and double-checked, and there seems to be no doubt that the contact is real. The basic fact is startling in itself, but the details are perhaps even more baffling. Whatever entity has managed to reach our receivers from their inhabited system, has also managed to learn a great deal about us. For one thing, the contact was made in the English language."

He held up his hand, trying to still their astonished reaction.

"It's been established that the contact came from the Antares system, from a planet which has been designated as Coltura. We have been unable to answer the signal and get our own message back, but that will not be necessary. The contact has informed us that a space vehicle is now on its way from Antares, and will be arriving here within the month." (There was no need to still them now; the response was one of silent astonishment.) "From what we understand of the messages received—all of which have been recorded on tape and will be played for you here—the space vessel is a photon-powered starship, of the type we ourselves have been attempting to design for the past eleven years. Presumably, it will complete the journey from Coltura to Earth in a period no longer than a few weeks—an accomplishment of some magnitude, as I'm sure you all realize. This event, as you might suppose, supercedes any

prior commitments of the space command, including the forthcoming third Martian expedition. Detailed assignments concerning the landing of the Coltura vessels will be made within the week. For the time being, that's all I can say."

There were excited questions hurled at General Van Damme as he concluded, but he waved them off. Then, after the equipment had been readied, the group of high-ranking officers listened in awed silence to the taped messages received from another world, in another system.

The static was heavy, but the thin, high voice of the other-world being penetrated the crackle, emerging sharp and clear. Despite its eerie quality, it spoke matter-of-factly, describing its position in the universe, providing astronomical data in painstaking detail. Then the voice announced the intention of sending a delegate to the planet Earth, and carefully described the navigational path the photon-powered starship would take on its Earthbound mission.

The tape was of short duration. But when the last sound was heard in the briefing room, its effect had been powerful.

"From another world," Kevin Chumm said aloud. "It's incredible . . ."

"I still don't believe it," Colonel Firestone, a grizzled officer who had taken part in the first Moon landing twenty years before, set his jaw grimly. "The

whole thing's some kind of damned hoax."

"But if they've authenticated the broadcasts—"

"Nonsense. They've just authenticated the cleverness of the imposter, that's all. Did you hear that voice? Perfect English! That's too much to believe. And another thing—" He snorted.

"What other thing?" Kevin said.

"That voice. It was a woman, of course."

"A woman?"

"I know a woman's voice when I hear it. Our alien's a woman; that's how it sounded to me. And I think that's stretching the joke a little too far."

But when the meeting broke up, Major Kevin Chumm wasn't only concerned with the truth or falsehood of the message from space. For the second time, he had been cheated out of his Mars journey, and this new twist of circumstance filled him with bitter resentment.

Thirty-four days later, the New Yerkes Observatory on the Moon reported the approach of a rapidly-moving object in space, an object whose flight path would bring it into Earth's orbital range within a matter of hours. If there had been any doubt left concerning the validity of the alien broadcast, it was dispelled as the object neared landfall. As it loomed larger in the telescopes, it became clear that the thing was a space vessel, moving with a speed beyond

the capability of Earth technology. All attempts at making radio contact with the photon ship failed, but the curious and excited officials of the space command had only a short time to wait. In the desert of Alamagordo, the starship made its descent, and just as quickly, was surrounded by a ring of protective security that concealed its passenger and purpose from the rest of the world.

Major Kevin Chumm was as eagerly curious as the rest of the space command to learn what secret the starship held. But he learned sooner than he expected. On the second day after the Landing, a top priority requisition arrived at space command headquarters in Pawling, ordering Major Chumm to report immediately to Alamagordo.

He knew that his requisition went beyond ordinary military exigency the moment he arrived at the field. He was treated too deferentially; too much like a visiting congressman. A special copter was put at his command to bring him to central headquarters, and the curious looks he got from the field personnel made it plain that his presence had some unusual significance.

He was shown directly into General Van Damme's quarters, and the general himself rose to greet him.

Kevin threw a crisp salute, and said:

"Pardon me, sir. But this reception—"

"I know," the general chuck-

led. "We didn't intend to unnerve you, Major. But you've suddenly become a VIP around here; you'll understand when I tell you what has happened."

He sat down and offered the major a cigarette.

"Ah you know," Van Damme said, "the photon-ship landed here barely forty-eight hours ago; most incredible piece of construction I've seen. It carried only one passenger, and the occupant was perhaps more incredible than the ship. Oh, we expected anything to step out of the airlock—some Wellsian nightmare, some twenty-legged spider, God knows what. But we were wrong, Major; I'm happy to tell you that. The creature from the planet Coltura is completely humanoid—to put it mildly. It speaks our language fluently, and we've been conversing at length since the arrival. And then the creature made a request—for an aide-de-camp, or chaperone, or whatever you want to call it."

He paused, and looked at Kevin with strange glassy eyes.

"The creature asked for you, Major Chumm. By name."

Kevin's jaw dropped.

"By *name*? You must be joking."

"I'm deadly serious, Major. I can't explain how a creature a billion miles removed from Earth could know so much about our affairs. The request raised cries of "hoax" all over again, but there's no question of that. The creature is genuine. We've examined the ship, and know that only

a greater and alien intelligence could have constructed it, employing alloys and techniques that are far beyond us. It's *real*, Major." He clenched his fists on the desk.

It was only then that Kevin realized how much strain the general was under.

"But why should it ask for *me*? That doesn't make sense—"

"Nothing makes sense," Van Damme said hollowly. "Least of all, the creature itself. But I'll let you see that for yourself."

He stood up, and gestured Kevin towards the doorway. The major followed him down the long corridor to an elevator. It descended to the sub-basement of the Army building, and into a bare room filled with buzzing subalterns. They fell silent at their approach, and their speculative stares were directed at Kevin Chumm.

"This way," the general said, opening the door to an inner office.

Kevin stepped inside.

The creature from the starship was seated in an armchair beside the window. It rose when the officers entered.

Colonel Firestone had been right. The being from Coltura, whose broadcasts to Earth had fired the imagination of the world, whose incredible photon-powered ship had baffled the intelligences of Earth's finest scientists, was a woman.

And what a woman! Kevin Chumm stared at her incredu-

lously, stunned by a vision of such uncanny beauty that he forgot all else at the sight of her. It didn't matter that she was an alien being, the first non-human ever to come within man's ken; it didn't matter that she had come from another world, in a star system countless miles from Earth. She was a woman, lovelier than any he had dreamed existed—long, cascading blonde hair that gleamed with pure-gold highlights, deep, enveloping violet eyes filled with tenderness and compassion, a mouth painfully beautiful, a complexion so flawless, a body so perfect that the simple white robes couldn't conceal an inch of her perfection. She was beautiful, beautiful . . .

He struggled out of his sudden trance, and tried to comprehend what the general was saying.

"This is Major Chumm, Areesa. The officer you wanted to see . . ."

She smiled, heightening the incandescent loveliness of her face.

"I'm happy to meet you, Major Chumm." Her voice was soft and lyrical. "I hope you will forgive my intrusion upon your duties. But this experience is so strange and bewildering to me, I thought it would be best if some officer were permanently assigned to school me in your Earth ways . . ."

Kevin tried to answer, but no words came.

"You're released of all other

commitments, Major," Van Damme said brusquely. "You're to accompany Areesa wherever she wishes to go, and to assist her in every possible way. Now I'll leave you two to get better acquainted."

He turned and left. Kevin watched him go out, in a state close to panic, and then slowly faced the blonde from space.

She was smiling.

"You are confused," she said softly. "You are concerned. But you needn't be, Major. As you can see, I'm quite like the women of your world. I look like them, and talk like them, and, I believe, feel like them. I am not a "creature" as your general seems to think. I am a member of another evolutionary species, but one whose kinship with your own should be readily apparent."

Kevin was finding his voice.

"How—how did you know me? Why did you ask for me?"

She laughed. "Is it really so mysterious? I have already told your inquisitors over and over. This voyage was planned for many years, Major; it was no sudden whim. Before we embarked upon it, we felt it was necessary to learn as much as we could about the affairs of your world."

"You were watching us? From Coltura?"

She chuckled softly. "In our own way, Major. In our own way. We have watched with interest your attempts to expand beyond the boundaries of your planet; it was interesting to see

you encounter the same obstacles and heartbreaks and triumphs we ourselves faced, many thousands of years ago. We knew it would not be long before you had the means for interstellar voyages, and we thought it best that we share our knowledge with you. The photon ship which brought me here will be of incalculable value to your scientists; it will further their progress greatly. That, I believe, is reason enough to be grateful for my visit."

"I—I still don't understand. Are all Colturans—women?"

She laughed again, a silvery trill.

"No, Major Chumm. Our sexes are like yours, male and female. But there the similarity ends, because on our world, the women participate on a wholly equal basis with the Colturan males in the affairs of science, art, and government."

"But you still haven't answered the important question. Why did you ask for *me*?"

"Because we knew you to be an intelligent, accomplished young man, Major. Surely that explanation should suffice? Of all the two billion men on Earth, weren't *you* chosen for the first exploration of Mars?"

"But I never got there," Kevin said bitterly.

"That was unfortunate. But nevertheless, Major, you're the man I believed would help me most. And as long as you've been commanded to be my aide—won't you make the best of it?"

She came closer to him. The nearness of so much overwhelming beauty was almost too much for Kevin to bear.

"All right," he said, swallowing hard. "It's my pleasure to be of service, Miss—"

"My name is Areesa," the woman said.

Major Chumm had learned to expect almost anything from his service in the space command; his duties had required him to fulfill many missions which were not detailed in the standard manuals of the service. But never before had an assignment like this one come along.

At first, he was pleased and somewhat flattered at the responsibility. Always publicity-shy, he began to learn to tolerate the flash of camera lights and the eager questions of newsmen. He began to move in select circles which encompassed high government officials, foreign dignitaries, prominent scientists; he became a combination companion, bodyguard, interpreter, and personal secretary to the stunningly beautiful woman who had come from outer space to stagger the imagination of all the populated world. At first, he enjoyed listening to her detailed accounts of life on the planet Coltura, a life which seemed to surpass Earth in its peace and wisdom and learning. He liked to hear of Coltura's dedication to science and art and the humanities. He liked picturing a world so much greener and fairer than the one

he knew, a world so close to the ideal that all who listened to Areesa's words felt envy and regret that Earth had not yet attained such perfection.

But after six months of being Areesa's aide, the task became something else. He didn't know what it was that troubled him so, that made his nights sleepless, and his days filled with unnamed anxiety.

One morning, alone with Areesa, she said:

"What is it, Major? What's bothering you?"

"Nothing at all. Why?"

"You cannot hide your feelings from me, Major. I have learned to know your moods in these few months. Something is troubling you. Could it be this assignment? Are you tired of it?"

He scowled. "It's just not the sort of thing I'm used to, Areesa. I'm a space pilot; that's my job. I should be manning a ship, not—"

She turned her face away, and a sharp pang struck him. He touched her shoulder, and then took his hand away quickly.

"Why do you fear me, Major?" Areesa whispered.

"It's got nothing to do with you," he said tightly. "Nothing at all. But I'm going to ask General Van Damme to release me, Areesa. I've got to do it."

She said nothing.

The next day, he sought an audience with the space command chief.

"I don't understand," the general told him. "You know the importance of this duty, Major."

"Perhaps. But it's not the way I can serve best, General. You know that. What about the Third Martian Expedition? Is that going to be held up indefinitely?"

"We're making plans for it, Major."

"But the plans don't include me, do they? I'm too vital for this *other* job, aren't I? Playing nursemaid to our blonde from space—"

The general chewed his lip thoughtfully. "You never seem unhappy to be with her, Major. I rather thought you were getting—fond of Areesa."

"That's got nothing to do with it." Kevin flushed.

"Maybe it has. Maybe you don't want to admit it, Major, even to yourself. But I've seen you with her, and I'm not blind. I may not be a young buck like you, Major Chumm, but I remember what it was like to be so crazy about a woman that you couldn't bear to be with her or without her—"

"That's not true!" Kevin said angrily. "That's not the reason—"

"Isn't it, Major?"

Kevin sat down, slowly, suddenly confronted with a truth he had refused to acknowledge. The general's words had brought him face to face with the fact—he was beginning to feel much too strongly for the beautiful woman who had come into his life from the other end of the universe.

"All right," he said dully. "I can't tell you all my reasons, General. But I'm asking you to relieve me."

"I'm sorry," Van Damme answered softly. "You have your orders, Major Chumm. You'll continue to carry them out."

Dr. Kris Borenson, chief psychiatrist of the Rickover Military Hospital, was a hard man to reach. For three weeks, Kevin tried to contact him without success, tried to learn if there had been any progress in the recovery of Captains Warner and Carey. But Borenson was too busy, occupied with more urgent matters, and Kevin didn't learn what they were until he visited the psychiatrist at his own home.

"I'm sorry to bother you here," he said curtly. "But it's been impossible to reach you at the hospital—"

"It's all right," Borenson said wearily. "Come in, Major. I know you're anxious to hear news of your friends, but the way things have been going—"

"What do you mean? What's been happening?"

"Nothing, as far as Captain Warner and Captain Carey are concerned. Their condition is unchanged. But my problem has not been them—it's been the hundreds of new cases which have been appearing these last few months."

"New cases?"

"The law of averages has gone wild," Borenson scowled. He was a jovial-faced man with ruddy

cheeks, but now he looked dark and brooding. "The number of shock chases has more than quadrupled recently—the hospital wards are filling with mental cases as hopeless as your friends'. I can't understand it—nobody can."

"I haven't heard about it—"

"No, no," Borenson frowned. "We haven't been seeking publicity in the matter. But the truth is, psychiatric centers all over the country have experienced the same phenomenon. Oh, perhaps it's not of epidemic proportion yet—perhaps the total of new cases won't exceed three or four thousand—but it's so much beyond the average that we're profoundly disturbed. And the most baffling aspect is the *nature* of the psychoses. The new victims are totally deranged, beyond the reach of customary drug or shock treatments."

"But why is it happening? Don't you have any idea?"

"No, not really. Oh, there are theories. The most popular one at the moment—not one I share—is that times of stress produce an unusual crop of such debilities. What with all this space exploration, the arrival of another-world being—some psychiatrists conclude that these events have triggered something in man's subconscious, something which produces madness. But I am not satisfied with this opinion."

Kevin watched him thoughtfully.

"You mention the other-world being—Areesa. You think her ar-

rival could have anything to do with this?"

"No, Major. The evidence is against any kind of alien contagion. For one thing, none of the new patients, to my knowledge, has been near this space-woman. Nor have those close to her fallen victim to this new malady. Surely you can see that rules out the possibility of any organic disease?"

"Yes," Kevin said. "Yes, I guess so . . ."

Borenson sighed. "We'll just have to watch and wait. Perhaps the cycle has worn itself out. Perhaps the law of averages will come to our rescue at last. Until then, I expect to be a very busy man . . ."

It was two days later that Areesa, the blonde from space, was killed by a jealous woman.

They were in the National Art Galleries in Washington, D. C., when it happened. Kevin was conducting the tour personally, without benefit of the museum guides who had eagerly offered their services to this distinguished visitor. But Areesa didn't seem to require guidance; she knew an extraordinary amount about the paintings and the artists who created them. Kevin didn't wonder at her knowledge; he had become accustomed to the surprising facets of the woman from the planet Coltura. She knew a great deal about most things.

As they left the galleries, walking slowly down the wide

marble steps leading to the street, a curious crowd watched them.

Neither saw the crazed eyes of the woman who was pushing forward in the throng. Neither saw the weapon in her hand, or the obvious intent in her expression. Before a single cry of warning could be heard, the woman was in front of them, the revolver raised, shouting words of vengeance.

Then she fired four times. Areesa, gasping, her beautiful violet eyes turning for one last, inquiring look at Kevin Chumm's face, crumpled to the steps and lay still.

He bent over her, and touched the blood that was soiling her dress.

Her heart had stopped beating, and the lovely eyes had been closed forever.

Later, they learned the meaning of the mad performance on the museum steps. The woman, Mrs. Theda Chasen of Chicago, told the police her story. She accused Areesa of stealing the affection of her husband, Philip Chasen. It was an act of insanity, of course. Areesa had never known or seen a man called Philip Chasen. The woman was examined at length by a psychiatric board, and declared not mentally responsible for her action. She was confined to an institution.

But the reason for Areesa's death was of no concern to Kevin Chumm. All he cared about was the fact that she was gone—that

the woman he had loved desperately was dead.

The world felt the loss, too, but in a totally different manner. The governments of Earth grieved over the loss of their one delegate from an important and advanced civilization; the scientists mourned the loss of their one link to the stars. The press felt the loss of the century's most sensational news story. The public felt the loss only briefly, as if Areesa had been a favored toy that had regrettably broken, and needed to be discarded. They soon forgot her.

Yet Kevin Chumm's loss was the hardest of all to bear. And because of it, he decided to resign his commission in the space command.

General Van Damme tried to talk him out of it.

"This is crazy, Major, you must realize that. You haven't failed in your duty in any way; you couldn't have prevented that madwoman from doing what she did."

"I don't know if I could or couldn't, General. But the fact is, I did. And now I want to crawl into a hole and forget things for a while—"

"That won't do any good, Major. You know that."

"I'm within my rights, General Van Damme—"

"It's not a question of rights, Major! I'm thinking of your own good, and of the command. I know what's really bothering you. You got too fond of Areesa, and now her death has thrown

you for a loop. But running away isn't the answer, believe me."

"I'm sorry, General."

The officer made a weary gesture.

"All right, Major. You know your own mind. I'll process your resignation in due course."

Two months later, Kevin Chumm was signing his name as "Mister" to an apartment house lease. For two months after that, he lived a solitary existence, sharing it only with the comforts of tasteless meals and even worse-tasting whiskey. He knew that what he was doing was wrong and harmful; that he was being goaded by a force new to him. It would have taken a psychiatrist to recognize the drive for self-destruction that had appeared in Kevin Chumm's psyche.

Then a doctor did.

It began with a letter, on the stationery of the Rickover Military Hospital.

Dear Major Chumm,

I have been trying to contact you for the past month, without success. Fortunately, a friend of yours at the command post in Pawling was able to give me your address. Something has occurred which I think you should be aware of, regarding the case of Theda Chasen, the woman who assassinated the spacewoman, Areesa. I first learned of it through a colleague at the Psychiatric Association, and knew immediately that you would be interested. If you could contact

me at the hospital, I would be happy to oblige with details.

It was signed in the scrawling, nearly-illegible handwriting of Dr. Kris Borenson.

Kevin re-read the letter. His first reaction was to throw it away; he wasn't anxious for reminders of Areesa and her tragic fate. Then curiosity overcame his reluctance.

He telephoned Borenson at the hospital.

"I'm glad you called," the doctor said simply. "I think you will find this interesting, Major Chumm—"

"Mister Chumm," Kevin said.

"When can we get together? I'd like you to meet this person—"

"What person?"

"It's Mrs. Chasen's sister, Margaret. Her story is rather incredible, but I think you should hear it. Could you possibly meet with us tonight?"

Kevin hesitated.

"All right," he said. "We can meet in my apartment. But can't you tell me what this is all about?"

"I think it would be better if you heard it yourself."

He spent a nervous afternoon and evening awaiting the arrival of Dr. Borenson and the woman. When they finally arrived at eight, he showed them into the disordered flat, and looked closely at the sister of the woman who had killed the blonde from space.

She was a woman in her early

forties, with irregular features; there was something of the eternal spinster about her. She was trying hard to appear calm, but it was obvious that a volcano rumbled inside the severe lines of her body. She refused a drink, and waited until Dr. Borenson, gently coaxing, asked her to tell her story.

"I—I don't know where to begin. I know it sounds strange, but—" She looked at Kevin hopefully. "My sister isn't crazy, Mr. Chumm. Not completely."

Kevin turned away, frowning.

"Believe me, it's true! Oh, I know it was a terrible thing she did. I guess you could call it a kind of temporary insanity. But she wasn't having any delusions about her husband, I know she wasn't. Because—because I was the one who told her."

"I don't understand," Kevin said quietly.

"It *was* that woman," she said passionately. "That woman who was supposed to have come from another planet. I *know* it was her."

"What do you mean?"

"You'd better tell it from the beginning," Borenson said.

"All right. I—I was very fond of my sister. When she married Phil Chasen, I wasn't too happy about it. He was kind of wild, one of these handsome types that are used to have women fuss over them. My sister was crazy about him, so crazy that she wouldn't listen when I warned her about him . . ."

"Go on," Borenson prompted.

"Anyway, they were married. Then, a few months ago, he started acting funny. Busy at the office all the time, that sort of thing. Of course, Theda didn't think anything was wrong; she was a trusting type, if you know what I mean. But I began to get suspicious, and I—I decided to find out what he was up to." She stiffened, defiantly. "So I began to follow him at night. I watched him leave his office, the usual time, of course, and go someplace downtown. And I was right, of course. There *was* another woman. He met her in some fancy cocktail lounge. She was wearing all black, and wore some kind of veil thing, but I knew who she was, all right. It was *her*, that *space* hussy!"

She looked at Kevin triumphantly.

He shook his head. "And how do you *know* it was?"

"Because I *saw* her, didn't I? I saw her with my own eyes. Oh, she's a pretty famous face, all right. You could hardly miss seeing it anywhere. Kind of good-looking, I suppose, if you like the type. I knew it was her the minute I saw her."

Kevin looked at Borenson, with raised eyebrows. But the doctor merely nodded gravely.

"Well, you can imagine how I felt. Not only was Phil Chasen *cheating* on Theda, but with that *creature* of all things. I was so shocked I could have died. I told Theda about it, naturally, and at first she didn't believe me either. I offered to take her along on one

of my—well, anyway, she refused. So I did the next best thing. I hired a man."

"What kind of man?"

"A private detective," the woman said smugly. "A real smart gentleman, named Holden O'Brien. And *he* got the goods on that Phil Chasen, all right! There was no question about it."

"Show it to him," Dr. Borenson said.

The woman reached into her large, flat purse. She removed a glossy photograph, and handed it to Kevin.

"There, Mr. Chumm. Now you look at that, and *then* say I'm crazy."

Kevin looked.

It wasn't a very good picture. It had been taken by an instantaneous-print camera, and the subjects had obviously been moving. But the faces were still clear and unmistakeable—the face of Philip Chasen, and the face of Areesa, the blonde from space, now a mouldering corpse in Arlington Cemetery.

"It—it can't be," Kevin said. "It's not possible—"

"Nobody else looks like *that*," the woman said shrilly. "Nobody *could* look like that—"

He knew it was true. He looked at the photo again, and denied what he knew to be true.

"It's impossible! Areesa never knew this Philip Chasen. She never left my sight, not for all the time she was on Earth. She couldn't have carried on this—cheap affair."

He looked wildly towards Borenson, who shrugged.

"I can't explain it either, Mr. Chumm. And yet there it is. Could it have been at all possible—"

"No! No!" Kevin Chumm shouted, getting to his feet. "The whole thing's a lie! This isn't Areesa — Areesa would never have *looked* at this man—"

Borenson's brow furrowed. "I think you take this too personally, Mr. Chumm—"

"Get out of here!" Kevin cried, waving his arms menacingly. "Get out!"

The woman rose quickly, her eyes frightened. The doctor nodded at her, and steered her towards the door.

"Get out and stay out! Keep your filthy lies to yourself! *Get out!*"

He slammed the door after them. When he returned, raging, he saw that the photograph was still lying on the sofa. He tore it into tiny shreds, and flung it into the cold fireplace.

But he couldn't shred it fine enough. The image of the photograph remained in his mind for the rest of the week, and he knew he would have to satisfy the nagging doubt it left behind.

In the telephone directory, he found only one Holden O'Brien in the listings, and memorized the designation beside it: *Confidential Investigations*, 210 South Street.

Kevin had his mind made up about Holden O'Brien even be-

fore he opened the frosted glass door of his office. He saw him as a squat, narrow-eyed man with a dead cigar between his lips, caring only for the contents of his client's wallet. But on the other side of the business-like desk, he found a man younger than himself, with close-cropped blond hair, black-rimmed spectacles, and the alert look of a college athlete. He was altogether too wholesome for the atmosphere, and Kevin's face registered his surprise.

"Yes, I'm O'Brien," the young man grinned, before Kevin asked the question. "You're Major Chumm, aren't you?"

"You know who I am?"

"You're the Sunday supplements' pet, Major. Didn't you know? What can I do for you?"

Kevin sat down and told him, hesitantly. There was a large part of the story that Holden O'Brien seemed already aware of. When he reached the description of Dr. Borenson's visit, the investigator said:

"So that's it. She's still convinced of that crazy idea of hers—"

Kevin gripped the arms of the chair. "Then you don't believe it either?"

"Of course not. I didn't realize my client still believed the girl was Areesa, or else I would have straightened her out before she made a fool of herself."

"You'll have to admit—the resemblance—"

"Oh, there's a resemblance, all right. An uncanny one. But I can

prove the girl isn't Areesa, Major, prove it without question." He smiled, self-satisfied.

"How?"

"Easiest way in the world. The photo was taken about a month before Areesa was killed. And there's no doubt that the—spacewoman's dead and buried. Is there?"

"No. No doubt."

The young detective spread his hands. "So there you are. The girl in the photo is very much alive."

A wave of relief spread over Kevin like a healing balm.

"Alive? You're sure?"

"Couldn't be surer." A slight flush tinted his cheek. "Tell you the truth, I got more than a little involved with her as a result of that assignment. We sort of got acquainted; I saw her only two nights ago. Her name is Alice Spencer, and she's a first reader for a book publishing company. She's out of this world, all right, Major, but not the way you mean."

"You actually know this woman?"

"I sure do." He looked happy when he said it. "She's nothing at all like Theda Chasen's sister thinks. She never knew that Phil Chasen was married—he had a habit of neglecting to mention that little fact. She dropped him like a hot rock when she found out."

"Could you show her to me? Could I meet her?"

O'Brien looked at him speculatively.

"Well, I dunno . . ."

"Please, Mr. O'Brien. It means a lot to me."

"Okay. If it'll really help you, Major." He reached for the telephone. "But remember, pal—she is *my* girl."

"Thank you," Kevin whispered, and watched the detective dial the number.

They arranged to meet that night at eight, in a restaurant called Denton's. Kevin was prompt, but when the moment actually came, he lingered at the bar and fortified himself with two stiff bolts of whiskey. Then he asked the headwaiter to show him to the table reserved by Holden O'Brien.

He followed the maitre d' slowly as he threaded his way between the snowy tablecloths. He didn't even see O'Brien rising to greet him; his eyes were only for the girl that was seated in the opposite chair. He wasn't the only man in the dining room whose eyes were upon her; her radiance created an aura that caught and held male attention like a magnet. She was beautiful.

But she wasn't Areesa.

Distantly, he heard Holden O'Brien introduce him. His gaze rested on the girl's face, and he marveled at the astonishing resemblance to the dead blonde from space. There was relief in his look, too. For all her loveliness, there was none of Areesa's unearthly magic about this girl. Her blonde hair didn't cascade; it was carefully cut and combed

in contemporary fashion. Her eyes weren't violet; they were blue, and with a glint of humor. Her complexion was strikingly flawless, but he could still detect the artful makeup that contributed to its perfection. Alice Spencer was definitely of this world.

"Holden's told me all about it," she said softly when they were seated. "It's not the first time I've been mistaken for . . . her . . ."

"It's an amazing resemblance," Kevin said. "But now that I see you . . ."

"Well, you should know better than anyone." Her voice was warm; he liked the frank way she looked at him. "You were probably closer to her than anyone on Earth. Was she really as remarkable as they say?"

"Yes. Remarkable," Kevin Chumm said.

Holden O'Brien looked uncomfortable. "Well, what you say to a drink, folks? This being a sort of occasion—"

"Nothing for me," Kevin said, suddenly not wanting the stimulation of alcohol. He watched Alice Spencer's face, as if her own answer would be significant. She said:

"No, thanks, Holden. I don't think I'll have a drink, either."

It was clear to all of them what was happening, but they went on talking about ordinary things. Like chemicals which had found affinity, Kevin Chumm and Alice Spencer sat and looked at

each other as if their acquaintanceship had been one of long years instead of minutes. Vainly, Holden O'Brien tried to prevent the inevitable from happening; but he was helpless to do anything but remain an innocent bystander.

They were having coffee at the end of the meal when they heard the commotion on the other side of the restaurant. At first, it seemed like nothing more than a waiter's mishap; dishes shattered loudly on the floor. Then they heard the shriek of women, and saw the man in the dark blue suit staggering between the tables in a wild, senseless dance, his eyes blank and staring, his mouth slack. Another man, his face pained and baffled, chased after him, but too late to stop the senseless rigadon. The man in the blue suit began to shout, and then fell forward, writhing as if in torment. The waiters rushed to him, one of them muttering about drunks, but it was clear that the man in the blue suit was suffering something deadlier than alcoholism. They picked him up, and when Kevin saw the man's distorted face, the sightless eyes, the lips muttering gibberish, he knew he was witnessing the onset of madness.

A few minutes later, the room was quiet again; it was as if nothing had happened.

"How terrible!" Alice Spencer said, only then discovering that she had clutched Kevin's arm during the outburst. "That poor man . . ."

"Third time I've seen something like that this month," Holden O'Brien said. "Seems like people are going nuts all over town..."

Kevin thought of Borenson.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

The next day, not even feeling guilt over appropriating Holden O'Brien's girlfriend, he telephoned Alice Spencer, and made a date for the evening.

Then, acting upon an impulse he didn't fully understand, he called Dr. Borenson. He expected that the psychiatrist would be relieved at the explanation of the mystery, that they would share a laugh over the mistaken identity. But Borenson didn't sound relieved; he sounded troubled.

"What's wrong, Doctor?"

"It's the same problem, Major Chumm; the same problem grown a hundred times worse..."

"You mean the psychos?" Kevin said. "I've been thinking about that myself. Last night, in a restaurant..."

The doctor interrupted. "Almost twelve thousand new cases in two months," he said. "It's unbelievable. We can no longer consider it a coincidence—nor can we hide the facts from the public. It's an epidemic of some sort, some kind of pathological epidemic. And the pattern is so strange..."

"How do you mean?"

"The victims are all men. Young men, too; none of them over fifty. And so many of them

are—important people. Men of standing and intelligence: doctors, scientists, scholars... it's terrible to contemplate what would happen if the contagion continues to spread..."

Kevin said something sympathetic. The news was disturbing, but somehow, he wasn't as affected as he should have been. For the first time in months, he felt a sense of optimism. The thought of seeing Alice Spencer that night was more important to him than all the psychotics in the world...

They went to an outdoor concert, and held hands from the beginning of the music to the last trailing note. Then they walked and talked, discovering their mutual likes and dislikes, and delighting in every new revelation.

They were together the following night, and the night after that. And then there was an understanding that no more nights would pass without their being together.

It was the happiest time of Kevin Chumm's life; so happy that he was blissfully unaware of the news stories that were blanketing the country with near-hysterical reports of a mysterious mental ailment that was sweeping the world. He was only vaguely aware that people were talking of nothing else, that the epidemic had reached terrifying proportions, that the hospital wards were filled to overflow with raving, mindless young men...

It was Holden O'Brien who brought him to the sharp realization of the catastrophe that was striking the Earth. The youthful investigator had accepted the loss of Alice Spencer's fond affection grudgingly, and Kevin had remained his friend. One day, he became something more. He became his ally.

O'Brien had asked him to call at the detective's office, with the promise of "something interesting." Kevin showed up at three in the afternoon, and found O'Brien surrounded by stacks of graphs and charts. It looked more like an accounting office than the quarters of a private eye, and Kevin chuckled.

"What's all this stuff for? Going into Wall Street?"

O'Brien didn't return the smile.

"Maybe something more important," he said, with a curious note of grimness. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about this loony epidemic that's got everybody so scared. Ever since I saw that guy go off his rocker in the restaurant—"

"I think these stories are exaggerated," Kevin said. "Mental illness isn't contagious. I think the public is being unnecessarily alarmed."

O'Brien frowned. "Take off the rose-colored glasses, Major. Ever since you met Alice, you've been walking around in a pink fog. I tell you this thing is serious; for all we know, either one of us could be the next victim."

"Okay. So what's all the charts for?"

O'Brien picked up a handful and slammed it to the desk. "I've been trying to trace a pattern," he said. "Maybe other people are doing the same thing, but maybe they haven't come to the same conclusions I have. It was hard to spot, at first—there didn't seem to be any common denominators in the ailment, except for the fact that all the loonies were men under fifty, and a large number of them were intelligent types. But that could be accounted for in other ways—too much cerebration, overworked minds, that kind of thing. But there's something else I've found, and I thought you might want to hear about it."

"Sure," Kevin said. "Let's hear it."

O'Brien leaned back in his chair and counted on his fingers.

"Fact one," he said. "There have been *no* victims of the ailment in certain areas of the world. The space command outpost on the Moon has had no cases. Certain other Army installations have reported no loonies."

"What does that prove?"

"I'm not sure. But it leads us to fact two. *Where there are no women—there are no loonies.*"

O'Brien looked dead serious, but Kevin couldn't help laughing.

"What's your point? That it's some kind of social disease? Or that it's the women that are driving men nuts—as usual?"

"I don't know *what* it means, Kev. But that's the fact. In iso-

lated army outposts, in prisons and penitentiaries, in all those places where the population is all-male—there are no victims of the illness. That can't be just a coincidence, can it?"

"And is this what all the charts and graphs are about?"

"Yes. Don't you think it's important?"

Kevin smiled. "I really would not know, pal. Guess I'm just not a statistician; I couldn't tell you if it makes sense or not."

"You couldn't tell me *anything* now," the detective said gloomily. "All you've got on your mind is Alice . . ."

"You're not sore, Holden? About Alice, I mean?"

"Who, me?" O'Brien smiled for the first time that afternoon. "Sure, I'm hurt. But I'll get over it. I met a gal last week that's helping me recover. Matter of fact, she even *looks* a little like Alice. Maybe that's why I'm interested."

"Glad to hear it," Kevin said. "And about this other thing—well, I'll report your idea to Kris Borenson, over at Rickover Hospital. Maybe he'll get some nourishment out of the thought."

"I hope so," O'Brien said grimly. "This thing gives me the creeps."

Kevin clapped him on the shoulder and went to the door. "See you soon," he said.

"Not if I see you first," O'Brien answered.

They were the last words he ever addressed to Kevin Chumm.

Dr. Kris Borenson studied Kevin's anguished face, and sighed. Then he offered the ex-major a cigarette. Kevin took it, but forgot to light it.

"This man you speak of," Borenson said gently. "Was he a very close friend?"

"I couldn't say that. But he was a friend. A young man, vital, full of life and ambition. Just three days before it happened, he was speaking to me about the epidemic; had some kind of cock-eyed theory he'd worked out with graphs and charts. The next time I saw him—" He looked towards the window, as if the sight of the open sky brought relief from the pain in his eyes. There had to be some solution to this nightmare.

"How old was he?"

"Not more than twenty-five, I'd say. And smart, too; like all the rest." His voice went heavy with emotion. "What's doing it, Doctor? What's making these men go mad?"

"I wish I knew," Borenson sighed. "I wish to God I knew." He leaned forward. "You say he was working on some theory about the illness. What sort of theory?"

Kevin gestured with the unlit cigarette. "Oh, I don't know exactly. Something about the fact that there was no madness in those places where there were no women. I don't know how he figured that out."

Borenson's fingers paddled the desk.

"Why?" Kevin said sharply. "Do you think there's something

to it? Does that theory make sense?"

"It's something we had already determined," Borenson said guardedly. "But nobody really has proved the connection."

"You're hiding something, Doctor."

"No, no. I am only sparing you from wild surmising—"

"Don't spare me anything! I want to find out, Doctor. I want to know why I've lost three friends to madness within the past year—"

"Nothing can be proved. It's only a fact, an isolated, lonely fact. Most of the psychiatrists deny its importance . . ."

"What is it?"

Borenson looked at him gravely.

"Most of these men were bachelors, Major. Only a handful were married. Yet from what I have seen in the testimony of their friends and relatives, it appears as if a great number of them had only recently met . . . someone."

Kevin felt chilled.

"Someone? What do you mean?"

"Some young woman. An attractive woman, by all accounts; someone they were profoundly interested in. The significance of it is far from plain, but it has happened . . ."

Kevin was thinking. "O'Brien," he said.

"What?"

"This man I told you about. The last time I saw him, he told me that he had met a new girl—

someone who was taking his mind off the loss of his old girlfriend. Taking his mind . . ."

"Please," Borenson said, hastily, "don't make any wild guesses about this. I have been accused of some mad thinking on the subject myself. It's an impossible notion . . ."

"What notion?"

"Please, Major—"

"You've got to tell me!"

Borenson looked away.

"Vampires," he said, with a snort. "Some twisted form of vampire; that's the word they've chosen for my theory. And yet it's not far from being quite descriptive. Some kind of parasite, feeding upon men's intelligence the way vampires feed upon men's blood . . ."

Kevin stared at the back of the doctor's head.

"You can't be serious . . ."

"I've already admitted that my theory is not in general acceptance."

"Yet you believe it? That these — women — are draining the minds of men? That they're victims of some kind of horror—"

"Be careful," Dr. Borenson chuckled. "They'll be clapping *you* into a cell next if you go on talking that way. I've been looked at suspiciously myself." He stood up. "No, Major. I have no proof whatever of this elaborate idea. It seemed to fit the facts, that's all. But I will be patient until the truth emerges; somehow, it always does."

That night, Kevin waited at

the bar of Denton's restaurant for his dinner date with Alice Spencer; a late meeting at the publishing house had delayed her. He stood at the polished counter, and watched the smiling, well-dressed people go in and out, the beautiful young women and their escorts. And somehow, the beautiful young women seemed different that night . . .

He was just finishing his second drink when he saw the red-headed girl enter. She was holding tight to the arm of a grinning young man in evening dress; they laughed as if the evening were a celebration of some kind. But there was something about the tilt of her head, the way her eyes flashed from blue to purple in the subdued light . . . something haunting . . .

Then he knew what it was. The girl looked like Areesa.

He slapped some money on the bar and followed them into the dining room. The headwaiter tried to show him to a table, but he brushed him aside. The couple was just sitting down; he stared boldly at them.

The resemblance was faint, but it was there.

"Something I can do for you?" The young man wasn't grinning anymore.

"No—no, nothing," Kevin said, moving away. Then an impulse came. "Don't I know you?" he said to the man. "Didn't we go to school together or something?"

"I don't think so—"

"What's your name?"

"Really . . ." the girl murmured.

"My name's Hal Conti," the man said. "What's yours?"

Kevin Chumm didn't answer. He returned to the bar, and had himself another drink. By the time Alice Spencer arrived, he was well on his way to being thoroughly soused.

He came across the man's name again, only five days later. It was in the newspapers, in a list which seemed to grow longer every day.

NEW VICTIMS OF MENTAL AILMENT

*Richard L. Prasser
Manford Gold
Victor Collins
Hal J. Conti*

He was afraid to call Dr. Borenson and tell him of his discovery, afraid of what it meant. But Borenson called him first.

"Something just happened," Borenson said crisply. "Something I can't understand, Major . . ."

"What is it?"

"One of the new victims is a man named Robert Iverson, a graduate engineer. He had a brother, and in speaking to him, I learned that Iverson had also met a young lady just prior to the onset of his ailment. But there was something else. He said that he had never met the woman, that his brother had been secretive about her, and that the woman had never permitted any

photos of herself to be taken, even though Iverson was something of an expert photographer. But Iverson had done something. He had taken a picture of her without her knowledge, using a miniature camera . . ."

"Yes," Kevin said, suddenly aware of what Borenson was going to say next. "What happened?"

"He showed me the photograph. I could hardly believe it, Major. But the resemblance was so distinct . . ."

"Go on," Kevin said. "It looked like Areesa, didn't it?"

"Yes," Dr. Borenson said numbly. "It looked like Areesa."

There was a long pause. Then Kevin said:

"I have to see you, Doctor. I think I know what's been happening. I have to see you right away."

"I'll be there in an hour."

"You were right, Doctor," Kevin Chumm said. "We're being victimized by a vampire. I've thought about it until I'm almost crazy myself—"

"You must get hold of yourself, Major. You don't look well—"

"The ship that came from Coltura didn't bring a beautiful blonde from space, Doctor. It brought a monster, a thing more terrible than the ugliest slug that ever crawled under an Earth rock. The beautiful package that contained it was only a disguise, a mock-up of bone and flesh that would be approved by

us. But it was a *thing*. A thing that drew life from the human mind, that fed upon human intelligence the way an animal feeds on meat. And it was cunning—I know how cunning. It set about to achieve its purpose with the subtlety of the serpent. It came among us in the form of a beautiful, desirable woman . . . and it attracted men the way the spider attracts flies. And then it ate its meal, Doctor. Knowledge. Mind power. Intelligence. Whatever you call it. And when it was sated, it threw the husks away. That's what has been filling your hospital wards, Doctor Borenson. Husks. The leavings of that . . . *thing* from Coltura . . ."

"Yes," Borenson whispered, nodding his head. "Yes, I know it's true . . ."

"It started with Captain Warner and Captain Carey. It came from somewhere in the cosmos, and ripped into their minds, tore out every shred of knowledge it could find there. It found its own form in their brain, Doctor. The form of a beautiful blonde woman, the kind of woman that all men would admit into their hearts and minds without question . . . It took that form, and came to Earth. But there was more than one Areesa. Areesa was only the spore-carrier. When she died, there were a hundred, maybe a thousand others to carry on the destiny of her species. But the thing's made a mistake, Doctor. It's left the stamp of Areesa on the faces of these vampire-women. That's how we

will know them . . . that's how we'll destroy them . . ."

"Yes. Yes," Borenson said. "It must be done. We must prove it to the world, and then we must destroy them . . ." He stood up. "Major, I want you to come with me. I want you to speak with certain people at the psychiatric association, people with high government connections. We must get official recognition of the truth, at once. Before it's too late."

"I can't go now. Not now, Doctor. There's something I have to do."

"You *must* go now. We can't afford to wait any longer."

Kevin rubbed his eyes.

"All right," he said dully. "I'll come now."

Three days later, a woman was arrested for no apparent reason on the streets of Culver City. Similar arrests took place in Chicago, Dallas, and New York. Even the officials who made the arrests weren't aware of the reasons for them, but they were even more perplexed by the instructions to carry out complete X-rays on the unwilling prisoners.

A week later, not even the security precautions of the government could hide the news from the world.

The X-rays were blank.

What followed was the most extraordinary police hunt in history—a diligent search for women with certain features, with sometimes subtle resem-

blances to the blonde creature which had come from the other end of space to eat away the minds of men. The chase was conducted all over the world, and no official word was ever given as to the fate of the women who failed to pass the X-ray examinations. But Kevin Chumm knew the fate was extermination. And it was Kevin Chumm who took Alice Spencer prisoner.

When he knocked on the door of her apartment, he found her waiting for him.

"I know," she said coldly. "I've heard about it. I suppose you've come to get me."

Kevin couldn't look at her. He turned his face away, as if to conceal the pain that was evident in his eyes.

"Do you love me, Kevin?"

"Stop that!" he grated.

"Do you love me?"

"I did. I thought I loved Areesa, too. And all I loved was some nameless thing . . ."

"Look at me, Kevin."

He looked at her. The effort was great.

"Do you really think I could be that? A thing?" She smiled slightly, and the smile was like a knife wound.

"You look just like her," he said harshly. "More like her than any of them."

"And what if the X-rays prove I'm human? Will that convince you? Or will you be too afraid to take the chance?"

"Don't make me suffer, Alice. Whatever you are, have some pity . . ."

"I knew a man like you once," she said thoughtfully. "His duty was more important to him than anything else—even love. You've probably met him; he was in the space command, too."

"Let's go, Alice."

"His name was George Warner. We met when we were in high school together. Did you know him, Kevin?"

He looked at her sharply.

"Who? What was his name?"

"Warner. Gig, we called him. You must know him; he was quite famous once . . ."

"Of course, I know him! It was Gig who—" He stopped, and then rushed forward to clutch her arms. "Alice! Alice, for God's sake, don't you see what happened?"

She looked frightened.

"It was *your* image that was

in Gig's mind. It was *your* image the creature saw when it found Gig and Carey on Mars. And that's the image it adopted, that is where the blonde from space found her beauty . . ."

"I don't understand—"

"But I do!" Kevin Chumm said. "Please—let's prove it once and for all."

"All right," Alice Spencer said softly.

Three hours later, the X-ray series was completed. Kevin Chumm took one look at them, and went racing down the corridor of the hospital towards the room where Alice Spencer waited. Then he drew her into his arms and kissed her.

"The pictures . . . ?" she said.

"Most beautiful pin-up pictures I ever saw," he answered.

THE END

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THE SEVEN EYES OF CAPTAIN DARK

By O. H. LESLIE

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

THE black waters of the bay lapped against the side of the Soloboat as the woman stepped onto the pier. Her heavy greatcoat was mannishly cut, its shawl collar concealing whatever troubled expression she wore. Skoggard wrung his hands in despair, and looked back to the island rock where his master's fortress, never before assailed by woman, sat squat and forbidding and without light.

"I told you it's no use, Mrs. Miles," he said nervously. "Captain Dark just doesn't see people any more."

"I'll take that chance," the woman said.

"Please, go back to the main-

land, Mrs. Miles. I'll try and convince him to see you, but some other time—"

"I have to see him *now*," the woman said, and preceded the thin, anguished figure up the path towards the house. Her step was firm, and Skoggard knew he couldn't halt her progress. With a sigh, he raced ahead of her to prepare the captain for her visit.

On the Widow's Walk, its spy-glass rusted with disuse, the captain lay full length on a springless divan. Lying down, he appeared even taller and broader than he was, a Gulliver chained by a different kind of captor. He was under forty, but the gray-



Captain Jonathan Dark

streaked beard he had grown during his island exile gave him the appearance of a Biblical prophet; only the lean, hard line of his body announced the truth of his age.

Skoggard hesitated at the doorway, breathing hard, afraid to disturb him, afraid to let him be. Dark spoke.

"What is it, Skoggard? You sound like you're in a state."

"I'm sorry, Captain. I tried to stop her from coming, but she insisted—"

Dark swung his legs to the floor and glared at his servant. "Who is *she*?"

"The woman who sent us those letters, that Mrs. Miles. She pulled up in a Soloboat a little while ago. I tried to keep her out, but she followed me here."

Dark got to his feet, steadying himself against the stone terrace wall. He turned his face to the sea, listening for the sound of breakers. Then his hands found the old telescope, and he rubbed its length affectionately. The spyglass, and the house, had once belonged to a sea captain, now five hundred years dead. Captain Jonathan Dark, until recently master of the starship *Empress*, felt a strange kinship across the centuries.

"All right, then," he said gravely. "If Mrs. Miles is that insistent, the least we can do is be polite. Show her into the study."

When she entered, the captain

was already ensconced behind the great oak desk, in a room that resembled the cabin of a sailing ship. The only anachronism was the spaceship model which rose aspiringly from its surface.

She said: "I know this is an imposition, Captain Dark. But when you didn't answer my letters, I knew this was the only thing to do." She removed her greatcoat and sat down, fumbling in her purse for a cigarette. He held a light towards her, and her first puff was also a sigh of relief.

"I did answer," he said quietly. "I answered your very first inquiry. I told you that I no longer charter my ship."

"It wasn't enough of an answer." Her voice shook.

"All right, then. Suppose you tell me the story."

"My name's Constance Miles," the woman said. "My husband is Peter Miles, and he is—was—a mining engineer working for the Gunsong Company. I needn't tell you about the Gunsong Company."

"No," Captain Dark said.

"I didn't want Peter to work for Gunsong; I hate everything they represent. But he wouldn't listen to me; six months ago, he accompanied a Gunsong expedition to the star system Virgo, presumably to do mining work on World V-5. The Gunsong ship returned thirty days ago." She paused. "But Peter wasn't aboard."

"What had happened to him?"

"The official explanation was very pat," Mrs. Miles said bitterly. "They said he had been killed during a routine inspection, by an explosion that destroyed his body completely. That was convenient, of course; there was no corpse to bring back as unprofitable cargo."

"I'm sorry," Dark said gently.

"I was sorry, too. Sorry and angry."

"At Gunsong?"

"At Gunsong, and at myself. I won't hide the truth from you, Captain. Before Peter left on the flight, we had decided to divorce. We had some terrible fights, and I said some terrible things. I didn't want him to work for Gunsong; it's more than a company to me—"

"Dictator of the Universe," Dark said softly. "That's what its critics call it."

"And its critics have a way of leading short lives," Mrs. Miles said. "Peter felt that way once; but when they started making overtures, offering him more money than he was worth, he began to see things differently. I hated him for it, and I told him so. I warned him that a job with Gunsong had some gruesome fringe benefits—like death." Her voice choked off for a moment. "I didn't know how right I was . . ."

"So you think your husband's death wasn't accidental?"

"I *know* it wasn't."

"How?"

She reached into her purse and

pulled out a strip of worn leather.

"I tore this from one of Peter's valises, the only one they returned to me. I'm surprised at their carelessness; perhaps they thought this inscription had another meaning."

She passed it across the desk. Dark looked at it, closing one eye. Then he handed it back.

"And now what do you want to do?" he said.

"I want to go to V-5. I want you to take me there, so I can learn for myself why they killed my husband."

"Quite a task for a lone woman, Mrs. Miles."

"I'll expect you to help me, of course. I know you've helped others. Everywhere I've turned, people have said, Jonathan Dark, Jonathan Dark, he's the man to help you. I couldn't ignore their advice, Captain Dark."

"Yet you know I've retired from active service?"

"Yes. But I hoped to make you reconsider your retirement. I know your sentiments about Gunsong; you've made them plain enough. Will you help me prove they killed Peter?"

The captain turned to the porthole-window of the room, his face thoughtful, his eyes distant.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "What you're asking is impossible."

There was a pause.

"Because you're blind?" the woman said.

Captain Dark, trembling, rose behind the desk like the

wrathful figure of a latterday Moses. His mouth moved, but he couldn't speak. Then he clenched his fists and forced a whisper from his throat.

"How did you know? How could you tell?"

"Forgive me," Mrs. Miles said. "It wasn't your lack of cleverness, Captain. The way you look, the way you move, the way you lit my cigarette, read the inscription . . . it's an amazing performance; I can't begin to explain how you manage it. But there was something else . . ."

"What?" Jonathan Dark thundered. "What else?"

"Me, Captain Dark. Your reaction to me. To speak the honest truth, I'm a beautiful woman. The immodesty is necessary. I've seen the reaction of men to me, and the symptoms are always the same. But your eyes were dead, Captain."

He sat down, slowly.

"Just to be certain," the woman said, "I handed you that strip of leather with the inscription on the wrong side. You didn't turn it over."

"And what did it say?"

"It said—*Connie, you were right.*"

"There aren't many people who know my secret," Dark said wryly. "My servant, Skoggard, knows. The first mate, Sam Wilson, knows. The crewmen of my last voyage know, but they'd sooner cut out their tongues than reveal it. Not even the authorities know the real cause of

my retirement, Mrs. Miles. By secluding myself here, I might have guarded it until my death."

"But why? Why keep the secret?"

"I don't know; I can't explain to myself. But when I was blinded two years ago, I dedicated my life to learning how to appear normal, to give the impression of sight. I have used whatever human and mechanical resources I could find. Like this, for instance." He rolled up his right sleeve. At first, the woman saw nothing; then she was aware of the hair-thin gold wire that circled the muscular arm. "This wire sheathes my body from head to foot, and connects to a power unit I carry on my person. At the approach of any solid object, the wire increases very slightly in temperature; I have learned to gauge distances to the thousands of an inch through its sensitivity. Watch."

Captain Dark took a sharp-pointed bill-holder from the desk and placed it in front of him. Then he brought his open palm down swiftly. The woman gasped, but his hand stopped within a millimeter of the wicked point.

"How—how were you blinded?" she said.

"My blindness? That's another story. I'm more interested in yours now, Mrs. Miles."

She slumped in her chair, dejected. "What's the difference? You can't help me. I was a fool to insist this way—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Miles, believe me."

She rose and drew on her greatcoat. "Thank you for listening to me; I didn't realize you had problems of your own. I won't trouble you again."

Then she turned and left.

Skoggard, the servant, accompanied her down the rocky road towards the Soloboat at the pier. On the Widow's Walk, his sightless eyes turned out to sea, Captain Jonathan Dark listened to the gunning of its engine as it headed back for the mainland.

When Skoggard returned to the house, Captain Dark reached up and removed his left eye.

The servant watched him undo the clasp of the metal cylinder to which the eye was attached, and lift out the thin strip of film inside. He handed it to Skoggard, and then dropped into the desk chair in a listening posture.

"Describe them," he said.

"Very beautiful woman," Skoggard answered, his thin, fleshless face glowing. "Very black hair, almost blue. Large eyes, blue, a little wet-looking. She was crying."

"What else?"

"Good clothes, almost no jewelry. Big ring on left hand, initialled P.M. The other picture is just a strip of leather, nothing more."

"Yes," Captain Dark said. "All right, Skoggard."

"That all, Captain?"

"No, one more thing. Bring shaving equipment and get this filthy stuff off me." He indicated the gray-streaked beard.

"You want the whiskers off, Captain?"

"That's what I said. I want to be neat and clean-shaven. I'm going into the mainland tomorrow, and I want to look my best. The Commissioner of Space Licenses expects it."

"The Commissioner? You going to see him?"

"Of course," Dark said wryly. "I have to. If I want my license back."

The servant gasped.

"But, Captain—"

"That's all Skoggard," Dark said. "Bring the shaving things."

He slipped the eye back into his head.

Dr. Alfred Mahon, examining physician of the Space Licensing Commission, looked up with a cheerful smile on his round face as Captain Dark entered the office.

"Well!" he said. "Been a long time, Captain."

"Yes," Dark said ruefully, slipping into the chair beside the doctor's desk. "I thought I'd had enough of star-flight when I quit two years ago. But I guess it's in my blood."

"How's the *Empress*? All fixed after that trouble you had?"

"Shipshape. She's a fine old lady, Doc, you can't keep her down."

Mahon chuckled. "Okay, then. Let's see what sort of shape you're in."

Dark tensed as the doctor touched his arm, in preparation

for a blood pressure examination.

"You're looking well," the captain said, with forced casualness. "Got a little sunburned, I see."

"Always happens when I go deep-sea fishing. Caught that big one, though, so it was worth it. What do you think of her, Captain?" He looked towards the wall, and Dark's head turned. His left eye closed briefly.

"That's a fine swordfish," he said.

The examination lasted half an hour.

"You're fine in all departments," the physician said amiably. "Now let's test that vision."

He slipped an Eyescope around the head of the Captain, and flicked the switch.

"Would you read the top line, Captain?"

"D," the spaceman said. "O, E, N. I. G."

"Next line, please."

"X, 6, P, 3, A, Y."

"And the next."

"T, V, U, 5, O, F."

"That's just fine," Dr. Mahon said.

A few minutes later, he put out his hand and Captain Dark shook it.

"Good voyage, Captain," he said.

"Thank you," Dark said soberly.

Skoggard, looking white-faced, opened the door of the car as he came out of the building. In the rear seat, Dark removed his camera eye, lifted the film from

the cylinder, and passed it to his servant.

"It's a swordfish," Skoggard said.

Dark breathed relief. "Thank God. I was depending on what I heard: that Mahon had been deep-sea fishing all week end. But I took a chance on his catch."

"How was the examination?"

"My friends at the Commission gave me all the right answers. I'd like to see Mahon's face if he knew the truth—that it was a feat of memory, not vision." He laughed briefly, and then leaned back in the seat, silent until they reached their next destination.

At the door of Mrs. Peter Miles' apartment in Eastview Terrace, Captain Dark's hand sought out the buzzer. It was several moments before the woman answered, and her start of surprise was audible.

Dark smiled. "Do you recognize me, Mrs. Miles? I would have thought my lack of beard was a perfect disguise."

"I knew you," the woman said faintly. "Won't you come in, Captain?"

When the door shut behind him, Dark stiffened.

"Is there someone else here?"

"Yes." She looked over her shoulder at the man on the sofa. He rose and came forward. "This is Bill Conrad, an old friend of m-my husband. I've been talking to him about my plans. Bill, this is Captain Jonathan Dark."

Dark put out his hand, and the

man shook it with cold fingers. He didn't notice the sudden droop of the spaceman's left eye.

"How much does Mr. Conrad know, Mrs. Miles?"

"Everything," the woman said. "I'm sorry, Captain—"

"You don't have to worry about me," the man said, frowning. "I won't tell anyone your precious secret. All I care about is helping Connie."

"That's my interest, too, Mr. Conrad. That's why I've renewed my space license, and have made arrangements for a voyage to V-5. I'm here to see if Mrs. Miles is willing to make the journey with a blind captain—"

"Of course!" the woman said joyfully. "Do you really mean it, Captain Dark?"

"Now wait a minute," Conrad said heatedly. "I can't let you take the chance, Connie. I'm sure Captain Dark knows what he's doing, but you have to consider your safety—"

"I've considered it," Dark said calmly. "I don't anticipate any trouble. I have a first mate I can rely on to be my eyes. If you still want to make the trip, Mrs. Miles, I can be ready within the month. There's a question of money, of course; that will have to be settled."

"Don't worry about the money," the man said. "I'll take care of that. But I won't let Connie go alone—"

"Are you inviting yourself, Mr. Conrad?"

"Yes!"

Dark rubbed his chin thought-

fully. "I'd say you weigh about a hundred and ninety pounds, Mr. Conrad. That's a lot of extra weight for a starship the size of the *Empress*."

"How do you know what I weigh?"

"From the sound of your footstep. But if Mrs. Miles would feel better having you aboard, it's all right with me. I could use a spare hand. Mrs. Miles?"

"Yes, please," she whispered. "If Bill could come, I'd feel so much better."

"Very well," Dark said. "Then let's sit down and make the arrangements."

He emerged from the East-view Terrace an hour later, and in the rear of the car, handed Skoggard the photo-strip from his eye camera. Skoggard squinted at it, and said, somewhat critically:

"Good-looking man. Movie star type. Sort of lean and pale-like, wavy blond hair. Who is he, Captain?"

"A passenger," Dark said.

Within three weeks, the photon-powered *Empress*, looking trim and spaceworthy and younger than her fourteen years was raised to the launching pad at the Alamo Spaceport outside of Houston, Texas. Captain Jonathan Dark, accompanied by his first mate, Lt. Sam Wilson, made the customary tour of inspection; not even the ground crew suspected that the eyes which scanned the ship saw nothing but darkness. Three

days before the end of the month, the flight office arranged the final details on the voyage, all appropriate records being forwarded to the Central Space-flight Information office in Washington. Two days later, the crew boarded. Captain: Jonathan L. Dark, Independent Starfleet. First mate and senior officer, Lt. Samuel Wilson. General crewman, Boris Skoggard. Passengers: Mrs. Peter Miles, Mr. Bill Conrad.

The journey had begun.

The atmosphere was tense inside the control cabin as orders for blast-off were radioed from the tower. But Captain Dark, as sure of hand and command as ever, guided the starship towards escape velocity and into the heavens. Four hours later, the speed of the *Empress* doubled and redoubled again and again, starspeed had been established. From that point on, there was only watchfulness and waiting.

A quietus seemed to have fallen on the captain; it was as if he had added loss of speech to his lack of sight. The others adopted his mood, but Mrs. Peter Miles soon tired of the silence. On the third day, she drew Wilson, the first mate, aside, and asked:

"How long have you been with Captain Dark, Lieutenant?"

"About seven years. I flew every voyage with him after we met, up until the time he—"

"Went blind?"

"Yes. Only he didn't go blind."

Wilson, a big, genial man with boyish freckles, flushed. "He was made blind, that's what."

"How?"

"They commandeered his ship, *this* ship. They just took it over one day, just as if he hadn't worked and sweated for it all his life. They put on their own crew, and made him take a lot of risks that shouldn't be taken—no siree, never—"

"Who did?" Mrs. Miles said.

"Them. The damned Department of Interstellar Development, that phoney government agency that Gunsong controls—"

"But could they do that? Just take his ship away?"

"They could, and did," Wilson said angrily. "It was during the Scorpio uranium strike. They said it was in the public interest; then they practically wrecked the *Empress* on their damned exploratory trips. That's how it happened—on a return flight to Earth. The Number Six rocket gave out and sent the ship into a cockeyed orbit that headed it right for the sun. Captain Dark figured the only way to save her was to get outside and make repairs; we were so close to the sun that it burned off his protective gear, burned the eyes right out of his head. He was lucky to stay alive. They had him hospitalized for eight months; Gunsong paid all the expenses. Sweet of them, wasn't it?"

"How terrible!" Mrs. Miles said. "No wonder he hates Gunsong so much—"

"It's not a company," Wilson growled. "It's the devil himself . . ."

A week later, inexplicably, the atmosphere changed. There was a sudden relaxation among the crew; the tensions which had marked the beginning of the voyage vanished as their destination grew closer. Eventually, the only one aboard the *Empress* who remained sullen and aloof was Conrad.

"You're making a terrible mistake," he told the woman. "I know how you feel about Peter, and I know this is more of a penance than anything else. But you have to think of yourself, Connie."

"I am thinking of myself," she said, her eyes fixed on the jeweled vastness framed inside the ship's viewplate. "I couldn't live with myself if I didn't attempt to learn the truth. I feel as if Peter's death is partly my fault—"

"That's stupid," Conrad said bluntly. "Peter was a hotheaded little idiot, you know that. But even if you *did* learn his death wasn't accidental, what would you do about it?"

"I don't know," the woman whispered.

They looked up to see Captain Dark watching them thoughtfully. For a moment, both forgot that he saw nothing.

In another week, they saw the bright sun of Virgo. And a few days later, the ship engines braked to normal flight speed, they

witnessed the ascent of World V-5 in the viewplate.

The atmospheric clouds were thick around the small, moon-sized world. As the ship's nose cut through the cumulus, they saw the murky black terrain interlaced by swift-moving rivers, and then the ever-widening rings of gray dots which were the Earth settlements. Captain Dark radioed in for landing instructions, and then skillfully, with the first mate's eyes on the gauges, brought the starship safely to landfall. They had already been briefed on what they might expect on the planet: a thin, but breathable atmosphere, which they would supplement merely by daily intake of oxygen capsules; a sunless, slate-gray sky and a temperature that never varied from 64 degrees; little vegetation, much industry, and no life except Man.

It was Man who greeted them first when they emerged from the ship: a burly man with an unshaven face and an unfriendly mouth.

"I'm Johannson," he said. "Which one of you's the captain?"

Dark stepped forward. "I am. Captain Jonathan Dark, Independent Starfleet. What's your duty, Mr. Johannson?" he asked with authority.

"Chief Overseer, Gunsong Mining. You'll have to report to headquarters and register your ship and passengers." His eyes were inspecting Constance Miles, and in a manner that

made Bill Conrad growl softly in his throat.

"We'll make our ship our headquarters," Dark said crisply. "And we'll want to see the Earth Ambassador just as soon as we've registered."

"Sure," Johannson said. "Just follow me."

Dark hesitated, and then, with his first mate at his side, followed their official greeter into the shack.

Two hours later, Captain Dark had his interview with Martin Deskey, Ambassador from Earth.

Deskey was a gray-haired, frowning man in his early fifties, but Dark needed no eyephoto to picture him in his mind. He had met Deskey before, on other worlds, and knew the itinerant Ambassador as a man of dyspeptic temper and unshakeable integrity.

"What's the story, Captain?" Deskey asked sharply. "This can't be a social visit, can it? Who's the woman?"

"The woman is Mrs. Peter Miles," Dark said. "Name familiar?"

"No."

"Her husband worked here not long ago, as a mining engineer. He was killed in some sort of explosion."

"A lot of men are killed here. We have thirty-five thousand men working for Gunsong at the mines alone. There are fifteen thousand other workers. Add in their families, and you get a to-

tal of almost a hundred thousand population. Expect me to remember one?"

"I was hoping you might. Or at least know someone I could talk to."

"You'll have to go to Gunsong on it; we have nothing to do with such matters at the Embassy. I'd suggest you talk to Johannson, the chief overseer. Have you met him yet?"

"Yes; he's a pig."

"Well, then go over his head if you can. See the big cheese; Charles Cleaves is his name; he's in charge of the entire Gunsong operation. But I warn you—he's not a talkative man."

"I didn't think he would be." Dark stood up and held out his hand. "Thanks, Mr. Deskey."

The Ambassador shook it, and then said gruffly: "Nice to see you again, Dark."

"Nice to see you," the captain said.

For the next five frustrating hours, Captain Dark, accompanied by Wilson, tried to make contact with the elusive Mr. Cleaves. Wearied of the effort, finally, he returned to the *Empress*.

"Where've you been?" Conrad said testily. "We've been like monkeys in a zoo all day. If that oaf Johannson doesn't stop hanging around here—"

"Johannson?" Dark said.

"Yes. When do we get out of here, Captain?"

"I don't know. When we get what we came for. Mrs. Miles—"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Are you sure there's nothing else you can tell me about your husband? I've questioned a dozen Gunsong officials, and nobody seems to know a thing about him."

"Of course," the woman said bitterly. "He's someone they want to forget."

"It's hopeless," Conrad said. "Don't you see that? Gunsong owns this planet—"

"Earth owns this planet, mister!" Dark turned such a ferocious gaze on him that Conrad shrank from its sightless glare. "Gunsong has a mining concession, and that's all."

"Look," Wilson said. "Here's Happy Boy now."

Through the viewplate, they saw the burly figure of Johannson advancing towards the ship. He came up the ladder, grinned at Connie Miles, and then grimaced at Conrad. But his face was blank when he addressed the captain.

"I heard you were lookin' for Mr. Cleaves, Captain?"

"That's right."

"What a coincidence," Johannson leered. "Mr. Cleaves' been lookin' for you. If you follow me, I'll take you to him."

"All right." Dark hesitated, and then said: "I'll be just a few minutes; there's something I have to take care of first. Skoggard—"

"Yes, sir?" The servant came to his side.

"I want to see you in my cabin."

They entered the captain's quarters. He whispered a curt order, and the servant produced a slim metal case from the files. Carefully, Dark removed both of his artificial eyes, and replaced them with the strangely glistening orbs that lay within the case. Their fire was dulled once inserted, and only the closest inspection would reveal that there had been a change in the captain's expression.

When he returned to the ship's control room, he said:

"All right, Mr. Johannson. I'm ready."

The central offices of the Gunsong company was easily the most impressive structure on the small planet. It rose four stories high, and its stone facade gleamed with mica high-lights.

The overseer left Captain Dark at the doorway of an office on the second floor. He sat calmly in the reception foyer, waiting for admittance.

He was kept outside a deliberate twenty minutes; then Cleaves opened the door and said:

"Come in, Captain Dark."

He sensed the impressiveness of the office through every nerve. The carpet was thickpiled under his boot; the desk felt like silk-smooth mahogany when he touched it. There was the smell of expensive cigar smoke in the room.

Dark went right to the point.

"I'm here in behalf of Mrs.

Peter Miles," he said. "Her husband was a mining engineer employed by your company. He was reported killed in an explosion. However, your officials seem to be either very forgetful or unusually reluctant; nobody even recalls his name."

"But I do," Cleaves said, in a smiling voice. "Mr. Miles was a brilliant fellow; we were all distressed at his accident." The voice came closer, and Dark knew he was leaning forward. "But I still can't understand the reason for this pilgrimage, Captain. Unless you suspect dirty work."

"What makes you say that?"

"I know about you, Captain; you're a famous man. Champion of the oppressed, that sort of thing."

"I'm flattered," Dark said dryly. "Then I take it you corroborate the story of Peter Miles' accident?"

"Of course. Unless you have evidence to the contrary—"

Dark rose slowly from the chair.

"Look at me," he said.

"What?"

"Look at me, Cleaves."

"What's got into you?"

"What do you see in my eyes?"

"Eyes?" Cleaves' voice trembled suddenly. "What's the matter with them? Why do you—"

"Look carefully, Cleaves."

"They're so strange . . . so bright . . ."

"Come closer," Dark said.

He felt the wires warming on

his body as the official approached. He put out his hand and touched the man's shoulder.

"Look deeply, Cleaves. Deeply . . ."

He heard the protracted sigh, and he knew that the effect had been successful.

"Sit down," Dark said brusquely.

"Yes . . ."

"Now you will answer my questions as fully as you can. You will tell me everything you know, without hesitation or fear."

"Yes," Cleaves said.

"Was Peter Miles killed in an accident?"

"No."

"Was he murdered?"

"Yes."

"Was he murdered at your instruction?"

"Yes." The voice quavered.

"No! Orders from headquarters . . . Gunsong's personal order . . . I merely carried it out . . ."

"Why was he killed, Cleaves?"

"I'm not sure. I think . . . because he knew. Because he found out . . . about the Charcoal Mines . . ."

"Charcoal Mines? What are they?"

"That's what they're called. But they're not . . . they're subterranean mines . . . incredible . . ."

"Speak up!" Dark commanded. "What sort of mines are these?"

"Diamond," Cleaves gasped. "Largest diamond mines in the universe . . . filled with diaman-

tiferous blue ground . . . enormous crystals, biggest I've ever seen . . . more diamonds than the whole universe knows . . ."

"Was that why he was killed? Because he found out, and Gunsong didn't want the story spread?"

"No. He had to know. He was brought in to analyze the extraction problems . . . him and a lot of others . . . they all knew."

"Then why was Peter Miles killed?"

"I guess . . . because he knew about . . . the Holiday . . ."

"What Holiday?"

Behind Captain Dark, the office door slammed open. He whirled, and heard an excited voice saying:

"Mr. Cleaves! Trouble at that starship—"

Dark cursed under his breath. Then he leaned towards the ear of the hypnotized official, and whispered: "You won't remember this, Cleaves. You'll forget our entire conversation. Now wake up and answer this man."

Cleaves groaned, and then shot to his feet.

"Trouble? What kind of trouble?"

"There's been a shooting. Some kind of fight between Johannson and that guy in the ship—"

Dark turned on him. "Who was shot?"

"Conrad," the man said. "Johannson was making a pass at the woman, I think. That's how it started."

Cleaves grunted. "See what your curiosity bought you, Captain? Come on—let's go see how bad it is."

They reached the ship ten minutes later, and found it ringed by curious spectators. Dark pushed his way through the crowd, and Wilson, the first mate, came to his side.

"Bad business," Wilson said. "Johannson got a little too familiar with Mrs. Miles, and Conrad pulled a gun. Johannson was faster than he was, though—he shot Conrad in the leg. Busted his knee-cap, I think."

"Where is he now?"

"A Gunsong ambulance 'coper picked him up a few minutes ago and brought him to the hospital. From what I heard, he'll be stuck there for a month—"

Dark sighed. "As if we didn't have enough problems. I'll go see Ambassador Deskey and find out the score. How is Mrs. Miles?"

"Pretty shaken up. I got a feeling it was more than palship between her and Conrad. Maybe you better go talk to her, Captain."

"I will."

He found her lying across the bunk in her cabin, in a strange silent mood.

"Mrs. Miles?"

"Yes, Captain. I'm all right."

"I'm sorry about what happened, but I hear that Mr. Conrad will be all right. And about your husband—I think we're making some progress—"

"I don't care about progress," she said dully. "I want to go

home, Captain. As soon as Bill is well enough, I want to return to Earth."

"But the job's not done—"

"I'll pay your fee, Captain. But I've changed my mind. I don't care what happened to Peter; I don't think I ever really cared. I want some happiness, Captain Dark, more than anything. I want to marry again."

"Conrad?"

"Yes. The whole expedition was a mistake. Even if they did kill Peter, it was a chance he took himself. He knew what kind of people they are . . . his eyes were open . . ."

Captain Dark's own sightless eyes blinked.

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Miles said.

"It's all right," Dark said gently. "We'll do what you want, Mrs. Miles. We'll go home."

Deskey was growling like an angry lion when Dark entered the Ambassador's office.

"I know, I know," he said. "You're going to file a protest about Johansson. Well, don't worry about it; we've done it already. He's under arrest now—"

"What will happen to him?"

"Gunsong will act swiftly, I promise you. Especially now."

"Why now?"

"This stupid Holiday of theirs is coming up. They won't want anything to interfere with that."

Dark tried to conceal his surprise.

"What Holiday?"

"Haven't you heard about it?"

The Gunsong Company's declared a mass holiday for their key executives. There'll be two or three thousand of them taking off for Earth next week. Damnedest thing I ever heard of."

"What's the idea?"

"Don't ask me. It's some kind of screwy policy, I guess. They'll be massing a fleet of Gunsong supply and transport starships in the next few days. If you're planning to leave before then, I'd suggest you start getting the permits right now."

"We can't leave," Dark said, standing up. "Not with Conrad in the hospital. And I've got some unfinished business here."

He found his own way back to the central office building, but this time, the elusive Mr. Cleaves wasn't available. He cursed his luck and returned to the *Empress*. In his cabin, he removed the hypnotic eyes and replaced them in their case, then installed another pair in his head. He was weary; he stretched out on his bunk and closed the lids over the unseeing orbs. In a few minutes, he was asleep.

The dream was as short and explosive as a burst of gunfire. He was at the controls of the *Empress*, heading the starship for the sun. He screamed, but he couldn't halt the juggernaut. The great fiery globe beckoned him inexorably, hot tongues licking at the skin of the vessel. Then he knew Hell.

He opened his eyes, aware of a silence too deep and enveloping.

"Sam," he said softly.

There was no answer.

"Lieutenant Wilson!" He sat up on the bunk. The wires on his skin were cool, cooler than they should have been. He stood up, and put out his hands, seeking a surface.

There was none.

"Sam! Skoggard!" Captain Dark shouted.

Only silence.

He walked forward hesitantly, the sweat forming a film on his face and neck. The wires failed to respond, and he knew he was in the middle of vastness. For the first time in his life, he felt truly *blind*.

"Is anybody here?" he cried.

The faintest of sounds came from somewhere behind him. He whirled towards it gratefully, hungry for some sign of life and substance.

The sound came closer. He went to his knees and touched the ground. It felt smooth as glass to his touch. He stood up again, and almost imperceptibly, the wires circling his body warmed.

"Who's there?" Captain Dark thundered.

Now he recognized the sound. It was footsteps. They were light steps, that could only have been produced by a child or a very small woman.

The wires grew hotter.

"Are you all right, Captain?" the voice said.

It was a woman's voice, so feeble that it was barely audible. He guessed the age of the speaker, and it was surely past seventy.

"Who are you?" Dark said. "How did I get here?"

"You were brought here," the woman answered. "At my request, Captain. As you slept, your starship was filled with a non-toxic vapor which brought unconsciousness to you and your passengers. The others are quite all right, I assure you; I doubt if they have yet awakened to be aware of your disappearance."

"Disappearance? Where have you brought me?"

The woman coughed politely.

"You will excuse me, Captain. Our family has made a great fuss about privacy for a hundred years. I cannot betray the name of the world you're on, if you don't mind."

"Another world?"

"Yes. You were carried off by one of our ships, so that I could visit with you."

"And who are *you*?"

"I am Madame Helen Gun-song," the woman said.

The short hairs prickled on the back of the captain's neck. Then he recovered his poise, and said, commandingly:

"I want to speak to your husband, madame."

A pause.

"That is impossible, Captain."

"I've looked forward to meeting him for a long time. If I could have that privilege—"

"No one has that privilege, Captain. Except his Maker. My husband, Arnold Gunsong, has been dead for sixteen years. There are no other Gunsongs except myself and my son. If you have anything to say to Gunsong, Captain—" Her voice took an amused tone. "You can say it to me."

Dark tried to cover his confusion.

"You mean *you* run this company?"

"Yes, I run it. Run it well, Captain. Ran it well since my husband's death. Need I boast of how successful we have been?"

"No," Dark said harshly. "Then what did you want me for? Why did you kidnap me?"

"Surely you know the answer to that, Captain."

"No, I don't."

"Then let me tell you. Your little expedition has been no secret to me; I knew of it the moment you renewed your license to make the journey. I know of your inquiries about Peter Miles on World V-5. I know your curiosity regarding his death. More important, I know about your interesting session with Mr. Cleaves—"

"You can't!" Dark exploded.

"I can and do. All of Gunsong's official conversations are recorded, Captain; it's a wise precaution of ours. It was simple to learn of your hypnotic effort. I must congratulate you on it—it was brilliantly done."

"Then you know that the con-

versation was never concluded," Dark said. "You know that we were interrupted before Mr. Cleaves could tell me what I really wanted to know—"

"Yes," the woman said.

"Will you finish the story for me, Mrs. Gunsong?"

She chuckled. "You're reputed to be a clever man, Captain Dark. Suppose you finish it for me?"

"All right. Then here's what I think. I think Peter Miles was killed at your order, because he learned something he wasn't supposed to know. He knew that the Gunsong Holiday had a grim purpose—"

"What purpose, Captain?"

"To protect the financial interests of the Gunsong Company in the diamond trade. Gunsong wanted its key officials off the planet, because something unpleasant was going to happen to it—"

"Brilliant!" the woman applauded.

"You knew that the Charcoal Mines on World V-5 weren't a blessing—they were a threat. A threat to the stability of the universe's diamond market, a market which Gunsong has always controlled . . ."

"One of the chief sources of our income," Madame Gunsong said amiably. "Go on, Captain. And how were we to cope with this threat?"

"By destroying the planet. Destroying it deliberately, but pretending it was another 'accident'—a cosmic accident which

Gunsong couldn't prevent. No World V-5—no Charcoal Mines—no debased diamond values. Is that it, Madame Gunsong? Is that what it's all about?"

The woman chuckled. "What a pity, Captain. Arnold would have enjoyed knowing you; you're just the kind of clever rascal he liked. Yes, we are going to destroy V-5. It is a business necessity—"

"And the thousands of people who will be left there? The men and the families? Is it a business necessity to destroy them, too?"

"I'm afraid so, Captain. Surely you can see how impossible it would be to evacuate the entire planet. It would be an admission that the destruction was man-made . . . No, Captain. I'm afraid some sacrifice is entailed."

Dark tingled with hatred.

"You're a butcher, Madame Gunsong."

"And you're a fool, Captain. A blind fool. In more ways than one." She laughed.

"What do you mean?" Dark said cautiously.

"Are you still pretending, Captain? I know your precious secret. I've known it from the beginning. You're blind, Captain Dark. Such an appropriate name! You've tried to hide the fact from the world, but you cannot hide it from me. But don't worry," she crooned. "It really doesn't matter any more. Because you're going to a great-

er Darkness, Captain. A permanent one."

He took a step towards her.

"Keep your distance, Captain!" She spoke sharply. "I'm not your executioner. That's hiring work."

The wires on his body cooled as the woman moved away.

Dark stumbled after her, helplessly. All the mechanical resources, all his training, were to no avail. He was a prisoner in a cage without bars, on a vast open plain without beginning or end. He ran in circles like a blinded insect, until his strength failed. Then he sank to the glass-smooth ground and waited hopelessly for death.

A few minutes later, he was aware of a Presence.

He looked up, and the voice said:

"On your feet, blind man."

He rose slowly, letting the warm wires on his body guide him to the source of the sound.

"Get up, blind man. I want to see your face."

It was a man's voice, hard and cold as a bullet.

He took a step towards him.

"Stay where you are," the voice commanded.

"What's your name?" Dark whispered.

"What difference does it make?"

"I want to know your name, executioner. So I can report you to the Devil."

The man laughed. Then he came closer.

"I'll shoot for the head, blind

man. It will be quick. You can thank me for that."

The wires of his body went hot as the metal of the gun neared him.

"Good-bye, Captain," the man said.

"Good-bye," Dark said, and with a prayer, tensed the muscles of his right eye and fired the single bullet in the chamber deep within his eye socket. It struck its target, and the man shouted in pain and shocked surprise, his own weapon falling to the ground with a clatter. Then he stumbled forward, and fell at Captain Dark's feet.

Dark bent swiftly to him, and felt for heartbeats. They were faint, but there.

"Can you talk?"

"Yes . . ." the man said hoarsely.

"Then talk now, or I'll finish you. What world is this?"

"I don't know."

Dark's fingers found his throat.

"I swear! I swear!" the wounded man cried. "None of us know . . . brought here in secrecy . . . don't know . . ."

"All right. Then how long have I been here?"

"Four days."

"Four!" The captain cursed. "Has the Holiday begun? The Holiday on V-5?"

"Yes, yes . . ."

"When will it happen? When will the explosion take place?"

"Today. Soon. When the madame gives the command."

"Where am I now? What place is this?"

"It's a landing field . . . six miles from the Manor . . . where the Madame lives . . ." His body made a convulsion, and Dark said:

"Are you all right?"

There was no answer. He found the man's pulse. It was silent.

Dark straightened, and then searched the smooth terrain for his fallen weapon. He found it at last: a heat blaster with a hair trigger. He dropped the gun into his pocket.

Then he began walking.

Thirty minutes later, he heard a whirring over his head. Not fifty yards from him, a 'copter was descending. Then the light footsteps were moving towards him again.

"You're an amazing man, Captain," Madame Gunsong said admiringly.

He drew the gun and pointed it in her direction.

"Don't be foolish," she said, in a smiling voice. "I'm better protected than you think, Captain. I could have you turned into a pillar of ash by the flick of my eyelash."

"Then why don't you?"

"Because a man of your courage deserves more than that, Captain. For one thing, I think you deserve the truth."

"The truth?"

"You were drawn into this affair because of a man named Peter Miles. I think you should know his real story before the

end comes. It's only fair to you."

"You mean there's something I don't know?"

She chuckled. "A great deal, Captain. You see, Mr. Miles wasn't that brilliant a mining engineer, Captain. It wasn't his knowledge which led to his destruction. It was something quite different, and quite personal."

"What do you mean, personal?"

"It's a pity you're blind, Captain; a pity that you never saw Peter's wife. She's a remarkably beautiful woman."

"So I've heard."

"So beautiful, in fact, and so desirable, that she was wooed by my own son. He wanted her more than he has wanted anything on Earth, and as his mother, I wanted his happiness more than anything on Earth. Even if he had disavowed his father and myself and his birth-right . . ."

"I don't understand."

"John was always a headstrong boy, and something of an idealist. When he was old enough to reason, he decided that the name of Gunsong was an abomination in the sight of God. So he left his home and his family behind. Then he met Constance Miles, and fell in love. But Constance Miles had a husband, and she was loyal to him . . ."

The light was dawning, even in Captain Dark's blind eyes.

"Then that's why you offered

him work on V-5. And that's why you had him killed, to free his wife for your son."

"A mother's devotion," the old woman simpered. "A gesture that John would never have condoned. But a gesture which has left him free to marry the woman he loves . . . Do you think I'm such a butcher now, Captain?"

"Yes!" His finger itched on the hair trigger of the gun. "But I want to know something else. What name did your son use? Was it Conrad? Bill Conrad?"

"No," Madame Gunsong said. "It was Don Allen . . ." Her voice was suddenly uncertain. "Why? Why do you ask?"

"Then your efforts have been for nothing, Madame. Because Mrs. Miles is in love with a man named Bill Conrad . . . a man now in the hospital of World V-5 . . ."

"You're crazy!" she snapped. "It's not possible. Constance Miles loved my son . . ."

Dark reached into a narrow pocket of his suit, and extracted a strip of film.

"Look at this, madame. And tell me who it is."

She took it from his hand. After a moment, she exploded: "But that's John! That's my son!"

Dark sneered. "Your spy network has broken down, Madame Gunsong. Your son is calling himself Bill Conrad now, and he accompanied us on the journey from Earth to V-5."

"I was told he was a crewman—"

"You were told wrong. He's Constance Miles' lover, and the man she wants to marry. He got into a fight with one of your underlings, and took a bullet in the leg for his troubles." He advanced towards her. "Where is the *Empress*, madame? Where's my ship?"

"It—it's gone. I commandeered it, took it off V-5 with the others—"

"Then Mrs. Miles, and my crewmen, are safe?"

"Yes!"

"But Bill Conrad is still in the hospital, isn't he?"

"He must be! But I've already given the order! They've started the reactors—"

"Then you've killed your own son, Madame Gunsong."

"No!" she said wildly. "Quick—follow me to the 'coper." She took his arm, and led him to the waiting machine as swiftly as her age would permit.

The automatic pilot brought them swiftly to the rooftop of the Manor. Dark followed the old woman, secure now in the solid presence of walls and ceilings, until they reached the broadcasting unit which kept the Gunsong company in touch with its far-flung divisions.

She gave hurried orders to the men at the transmitters, while Dark stood by and listened.

It was over an hour before contact with V-5 was establish-

ed, an hour with agonizingly long minutes.

Then the answer came.

The man at the transmitter whirled to face them.

"It's all right," he said briskly. "They were able to halt the chain reaction in time. There's no blow-up."

"Thank God," Captain Dark whispered.

"John . . ." Madame Gunsong said.

A Gunsong employee stepped towards them.

"Madame Gunsong? Do you wish this man made prisoner?"

"No," the woman said wearily. "I want him released. I want him returned to his ship, and his friends. And I want the man called Bill Conrad removed from the V-5 hospital and brought here . . ."

"Wait," Dark said. "I have a better idea for you, madame. I suggest you go to see him."

"You're right," the old woman said. "I'll go to him, Captain." She touched his arm. "Thank you, young man. I haven't met your like since Arnold's death . . ."

"I'm not flattered, madame."

She chuckled. "No, I suppose you're not. But I want you to know that V-5 will be safe. I think Gunsong will get out of the diamond business . . . There are plenty of other opportunities, Captain."

"No doubt. I wish you bad luck in all of them, madame."

"You are like Arnold," Madame Gunsong said.

Skoggard stood in the doorway of the Widow's Walk, afraid to disturb the captain's rest. Finally, Dark stirred and turned to him.

"What is it?" he said testily. "You're panting like a dog, Skoggard."

"I—I'm sorry, Captain. I know you wanted to be alone. I told the man that you weren't seeing anybody these days, but he practically knocked me down—"

"What man?"

"The man at the pier. He said he had a terrible problem, and needed your ship in the worst

way. I told him that you just weren't chartering your ship, even if you did make the V-5 journey—"

"Where is he now?"

"On the dock; I wouldn't let him come to the house, Captain. Just as you ordered. I knew you wouldn't want to be bothered, that you wanted some peace and quiet . . ."

Dark got to his feet, and chuckled.

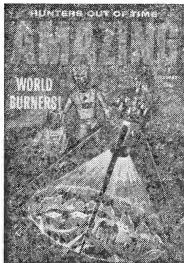
"You know something, Skoggard? Sometimes I think *you're* the blind man."

And he went down the rocky path to meet his visitor.

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

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In space, a vengeful fleet waited.... Then the furred strangers arrived with a plan to save Earth's children. But the General wasn't sure if he could trust an

ALIEN OFFER

By AL SEVCIK

ILLUSTRATOR LLEWELLYN

YOU are General James Rothwell?"

Rothwell sighed. "Yes, Commander Aku. We have met several times."

"Ah, yes. I recognize your insignia. Humans are so alike." The alien strode importantly across the office, the resilient pads of his broad feet making little plopping sounds on the rug, and seated himself abruptly in the visitor's chair beside Rothwell's desk. He gave a sharp cry, and another alien, shorter, but sporting similar, golden fur, stepped into the office and closed the door. Both wore simple, brown uniforms, without ornamentation.

"I am here," Aku said, "to tell you something." He stared impassively at Rothwell for a minute, his fur-covered, almost human face completely expressionless, then his gaze shifted to the window, to the hot runways of New York International Airport and to the immense gray spaceship that, even from the center of the field, loomed above the hangars and passenger buildings. For an instant, a quick, unguessable emotion clouded the wide black eyes and tightened the thin lips, then it was gone.

Rothwell waited.

"General, Earth's children must all be aboard my ships within one week. We will start



The aliens supervised the loading as anguished parents looked on.

to load on the sixth day, next Thursday." He stood.

Rothwell locked eyes with the alien, and leaned forward, grinding his knuckles into the desk top. "You know that's impossible. We can't select 100,000 children from every country and assemble them in only six days."

"You will do it." The alien turned to leave.

"Commander Aku! Let me remind you . . ."

Aku spun around, eyes flashing. "General Rothwell! Let me remind you that two weeks ago I didn't even know Earth existed, and since accidentally happening across your sun system and learning of your trouble I have had my entire trading fleet of a hundred ships in orbit about this planet while all your multitudinous political subdivisions have filled the air with talk and wrangle.

"I am sorry for Earth, but my allegiance is to my fleet and I cannot remain longer than seven more days and risk being caught up in your destruction. Now, either you accept my offer to evacuate as many humans as my ships will carry, or you don't." He paused. "You are the planet's evacuation coordinator; you will give me an answer."

Rothwell's arms sagged, he sunk back down into his chair, all pretense gone. Slowly he swung around to face the window and the gray ship, standing like a Gargantuan sundial counting the last days of Earth. He

almost whispered. "We are choosing the children. They will be ready in six days."

He heard the door open and close. He was alone.

Five years ago, he thought, we cracked the secret of faster-than-light travel, and since then we've built about three dozen exploration ships and sent them out among the stars to see what they could see.

He stared blankly at the palms of his hand. I wonder what it was we expected to find?

We found that the galaxy was big, that there were a lot of stars, not so many planets, and practically no other life—at least no intelligence to compare with ours. Then . . . He jabbed a button on his intercom.

"Ed Philips here. What is it Jim?"

"Doc, are you sure your boys have hypo'd, couched, and hypo'd the Leo crew with everything you've got?"

The voice on the intercom sighed. "Jim, those guys haven't got a memory of their own. We know everything about each one of them, from the hurts he got falling off tricycles to the feel of the first girl he kissed. Those men aren't lying, Jim."

"I never thought they were lying, Doc." Rothwell paused for a minute and studied the long yellow hairs that grew sparsely across the back of his hand, thickened to a dense grove at his wrist, and vanished under the sleeve of his uniform. He looked back at the intercom. "Doc, all

I know is that three perfectly normal guys got on board that ship, and when it came back we found a lot of jammed instruments and three men terrified almost to the point of insanity."

"Jim, if you'd seen . . ."

Rothwell interrupted. "I know. Five radio-active planets with the fresh scars of cobalt bombs and the remains of civilizations. Then radar screens erupting crazily with signals from a multi-thousand ship space fleet; vector computers hurriedly plotting and re-plotting the fast-moving trajectory, submitting each time an unvarying answer for the fleet's destination—our own solar system." He slapped his hand flat against the desk. "The point is, Doc, it's not much to go on, and we don't dare send another ship to check for fear of attracting attention to ourselves. If we could only be *sure*."

"Jim," over the intercom, Philip's voice seemed to waver slightly, "those men honestly saw what they say. I'd stake my life on it."

"All of us are, Doc." He flipped the off button. Just thirty days now, since the scout ship Leo's discovery and the panicked dash for home with the warning. Not that the warning was worth much, he reflected, Earth had no space battle fleet. There had never been any reason to build one.

Then, two weeks ago, Aku's trading fleet had descended from nowhere, having blundered, he said, across Earth's orbit while

on a new route between two distant star clusters. When told of the impending attack, Aku immediately offered to cancel his trip and evacuate as many humans as his ships could hold, so that humanity would at least survive, somewhere in the galaxy. Earth chose to accept his offer.

"Hobson's choice," Rothwell growled to himself. "No choice at all." After years of handling hot and cold local wars and crises of every description, his military mind had become conditioned to a complete disbelief in fortuitous coincidence, and he gagged at the thought of Aku "just happening by." Still frowning, he punched a yellow button on his desk, and reviewed in his mind the things he wanted to say.

"Jim! Isn't everything all right?"

Chagrined, Rothwell scrambled to his feet, the President had never answered so quickly before. He faced the screen on the wall to his right and saluted, amazed once again at how old the man looked. Sparse white hair criss-crossed haphazardly over the President's head, his face was lined with deep trenches that not even the most charitable could call wrinkles, and the faded eyes that stared from deep caverns no longer radiated the flaming vitality that had inspired victorious armies in the African war.

"Commander Aku was just

here, sir. He demands that the children be ready for evacuation next Thursday. I told him that it would be damned difficult."

The face on the screen paled perceptibly. "I hope you didn't anger the commander!"

Rothwell ground his teeth. "I told him we'd deliver the goods on Thursday."

Presidential lips tightened. "I don't care for the way you said that, General."

Rothwell straightened. "I apologize, sir. It's just that this whole lousy setup has me worried silly. I don't like Aku making like a guardian angel and us having no choice but to dance to his harp." His fingers clenched. "God knows we need his help, and I guess its wrong to ask too many questions, but how come he's only landed one of his ships, and why is it that he and his lieutenant are the only aliens to leave that ship—the only aliens we've ever even seen? It just doesn't figure out!" There, he thought, I've said it.

The President looked at him quietly for a minute, then answered softly, "I know, Jim, but what else can we do?" Rothwell winced at the shake in the old man's voice.

"I don't know," he said. But Aku's got us in a hell of a spot."

"Uh, Jim. You haven't said this in public, have you?"

Rothwell snorted. "No, *sir*, I don't care for a panic."

"There, there, Jim." The President smiled weakly. "We can't expect the aliens to act like

we do, can we?" He began to adopt the preacher tone he used so effectively in his campaign speeches. "We must be thankful for the chance breeze that wafted Commander Aku to these shores, and for his help. Maybe the war fleet won't arrive after all and everything will turn out all right. You're doing a fine job, Jim." The screen went blank.

Rothwell felt sick. He felt sorry for the President, but sorrier for the Western Democratic Union, to be captained by such a feeble thing. Leaning back in his chair, he glared at the empty screen. "You can't solve problems by wishing them away. You knew that once."

His mind wandered, and for a minute he thought he could actually feel the growing pressure of three billion people waiting for the computers of Moscow Central to make their impartial choice from the world's children. Trained mathematicians, the best that could be mustered from every major country, monitored each phase of the project to insure its absolute honesty. One hundred thousand children were to be picked completely at random; brown, yellow, black, white, red; sick or well; genius or moron; every child had an equal chance. This fact, this fact alone gave every parent hope, and possibly prevented worldwide rioting.

But with the destruction of the planet an almost certainty, the collective nervous system

was just one micron away from explosion. There was nothing else to think about or talk about, and no one tried to pretend any different.

Rothwell's eyes moved involuntarily to the little spherical tri-photo on his desk, just an informal shot he'd snapped a few months back of Martha and her proudest possessions, their ram-bunctious, priceless off-spring. Jim, Jr., in his space scouts uniform, and Mary Ellen with that crazy hair-do she was so proud of them, but had already forgotten.

"Damn!" he said aloud. "Damn it to hell!" In one quick movement, he spun his chair around and jabbed at the intercom. "Get the heli!" His voice crackled.

Grabbing his hat, he yanked open the door and strode into the sudden quiet of the small office. He turned right and went out through a side entrance to a small landing ramp, arriving just as his personal heli touched down. He climbed in. "To the ship."

As he settled back in the hard seat, Rothwell offered a silent thanks that, instead of asking which ship, Sergeant Johnson promptly lifted and headed for the gray space vessel that dominated the field.

A few hundred yards from the craft he said, "You'd better set her down here, Sarge, and let me walk in. Our friends might get nervous about something flying in at them."

He jumped out, squinting

against the hot glare off the concrete, and then, with a slight uneasiness, stepped into the dark shadow that pointed a thousand feet along the runway, away from the setting sun. He walked towards the ship.

A few seconds later, his eye caught a small, unexplained flash and he threw himself flat just as a section of pavement exploded, a dozen feet ahead.

Cursing, Rothwell picked himself off the ground, brushed the dust off his uniform, and stood quietly. He didn't have long to wait.

A small cubicle juttied out from the ship and lowered itself along a monorail running down to the ground. The side nearest him opened revealing, as Rothwell expected, Commander Aku and his lieutenant who both hurried over to where he was standing, as if to keep him from coming forward to meet them—and in so doing coming nearer the ship. As the commander trotted rapidly towards him, Rothwell noted that he was still buttoning his jacket and that the shirt underneath looked suspiciously as if it hadn't been buttoned at all. Funny, he thought, that my presence should cause such a panic.

"General, what a pleasure." The commander's disconcerted look belied his words, but even as he spoke he began to regain his composure and assume the poker face that Rothwell had come to expect.

"I do hope," said Rothwell,

"that my visit hasn't inconvenienced you."

Aku and his lieutenant traded swift glances, neither said anything.

"Well," Rothwell began again, "I am here to convey to you the good wishes of the President of our country and to submit a request from him and from the other governments of the Earth."

Aku straightened. "Though merely the commander of a poor trading fleet, I feel sure I speak for my empire when I wish your President good health. The request?"

Rothwell spoke evenly, trying to keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Commander, when the attack comes we expect that Earth with all its life will be annihilated. But your offer to transport a hundred thousand children to your own home worlds has prevented despair, and has at least given us hope that if we will not see the future our children will."

Aku nodded slightly, avoiding his eyes. "You take it well."

"But it takes more than hope, Commander. We need some assurance, also, that our children will be all right." He took an involuntary step nearer the alien, whose facial muscles never moved, and who turned away slightly, refusing to meet Rothwell's eyes.

"Commander, you and your lieutenant are the only members of your race that we have ever

seen, and then only on official business. We would like very much to meet the others. Why don't you land your ships and give the crews liberty, so that we can meet them informally and they can get to know us, also? That way it won't seem as if we are giving our kids over to complete strangers."

Without turning his head, Aku said flatly, "That is impossible. Do you want reasons?"

"No," Rothwell said quietly. "If you don't want to do something, it's easy enough to think up reasons." He ached to reach out and grab the alien neck, to shake some expression into that frozen face. "Look, Commander, surely the friendship of a doomed race can't bring any harm to your crew!"

Aku faced him now. "What you ask is impossible."

Ashamed of the desperate note that crept inadvertently into his voice, Rothwell said, "Commander, will you let me, alone, briefly enter your ship, so that I can tell my people what it is like?"

Aku and the lieutenant traded a long, silent look, then the lieutenant almost imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders. Without moving, turned partly away from Rothwell, Aku said, simply, "No." The two started to walk back to the ship.

"Commander!"

They stopped, but didn't turn.

"Commander Aku, if you have any sort of God in your empire, or any sort of honor that your race swears by, please tell me

one thing—tell me that our children will be safe, I won't ask you anything else."

The two aliens stood still, facing away from him, towards their ship. Minutes passed. Rothwell stood quietly, looking at their backs, human appearing, but hiding unguessable thoughts. Neither of them moved, or said a word. Finally, he turned and walked away, back towards his heli.

He leaned back in the little heli's bucket seat and ran a large hand through unruly yellow hair that was already flecked with white. The first evening lights of Brooklyn and Queens and, off to the left, Manhattan, moved unseen beneath him as the craft headed towards his home. Dammit, he thought, is it that Aku just doesn't care what we think, or that he cares very much what we would think if we knew whatever it is he's hiding?

He banged his fists together in frustration. How the hell can anyone guess what goes on in an alien mind? His whole damn brain is probably completely different! Maybe to him a poker face is friendly. Maybe he's honestly not hiding anything at all. He looked out as the heli slowly started its descent. No evidence, he thought. Not a shred, except a suspicious mind and, he glanced at the dirt on his trousers, and a shell exploding in my face.

He slapped his hat back on and whirled to the surprised pilot. "Dammit, I don't make the

decisions, I'm just in charge of loading, and if the President says it's okay, then it's okay with me!" He stepped out onto the grass of his yard, and quashed a little shriek of conscience somewhere in the back of his mind.

Blinding lights pinned him in mid-stride. A familiar voice sprang out of the glare, "Here he is now viewers, General James Rothwell, commander of the western armies, and head of the Earth evacuation project. General, International-TV cameras have been waiting secretly in your yard for hours for your return."

As his eyes adjusted, Rothwell distinguished a camera crew, their small portable instrument, and a young, smooth talking announcer that he had seen several times on television. He forced the annoyance out of his eyes. This, he thought, is all I need.

"What the general doesn't know," the announcer went on, "is that earlier this evening it was announced by Moscow Central that the computers had picked his son as one of the evacuees!"

The shock was visible on 150,000,000 TV sets. Completely unexpected, the surprise of the announcement hit Rothwell like a physical blow; his eyes widened, his chin dropped, and for an instant the world's viewers read in his face the frank emotions of a father, unshielded by

military veneer. Then years of training took command, and he faced the camera, apparently calm, though churning internally. The odds, he thought confusedly, the odds must be at least ten thousand to one! Then he realized that someone was talking to him, waving a microphone.

"Er, I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch . . ." he mumbled at the camera.

The announcer laughed amiably. "Certainly can't blame you, this must be a really big night! How does it feel, General, for your son to be one of the evacuees?"

Something in the back of his mind twisted the question. How does it feel, General, to turn your only son over to a poker-faced alien who shoots when you walk near his ship? "I'm not sure," he said, "how I feel."

Talking excitedly, the announcer drew closer. "To think that your name will live forever in the vast star clusters of the galaxy!" He lowered his voice. "General, speaking now unofficially, as a parent, to the thousands of other parents whose children may also be selected, and to the rest of us who . . ." he seemed to stumble for a word, and for an instant Rothwell saw him, too, as a man worried and afraid, instead of as part of a television machine. "Well, General, *you've* had contact with the aliens, are you glad your son is going?"

Rothwell looked at the strained

face of the announcer, at the camera crew quietly eyeing him, and at the small huddled group of neighbors hovering in the background, and he knew that his next words might be the most critical he would ever use in his life. In a world strained emotionally almost beyond endurance, the wrong words, a hint of a suspicion, could spark the riots that would kill millions and bring total destruction.

He faced the camera and said calmly, "I am glad my son is going. I wish it could happen for everyone. Commander Aku has assured me that everything will turn out all right." Mentally he begged for forgiveness, there was nothing else he could say. Sweat glistened on his forehead as he tried to fight down the memory of Aku turning his back on the plea that echoed in his brain—"tell me that our children will be safe."

The front door of the house banged open and all at once Martha was in his arms, crying, laughing. "Oh, Jim, I'm so glad, so very glad!" Rothwell blinked his eyes as he put his arm around her and waved the camera away. Tears sparkled on his cheeks; but neither Martha nor the viewers knew why.

The next morning Aku and his ever-present lieutenant were waiting when Rothwell's heli set him down in front of the administration building, a few minutes later than usual. They followed him into his office.

"Coffee?" Rothwell held out a paper cup.

"No thank you," said Aku, as expressionless as ever. "We are here to make final arrangements for the evacuation."

"I see. Well," said Rothwell, "Thursday will be a very painful day for us and we will want to expedite things as much as possible."

Aku nodded.

Rothwell went on. "I have made arrangements to have a hundred air fields cleared at various population centers around the world. That way your ships can land simultaneously, one at each field, and the loading can be finished in very little time. Now," he opened a desk drawer, "here is a list of . . ."

Aku held up a fur-covered hand. "That will not be possible."

Rothwell looked down at his desk and closed his eyes briefly. I knew it, he thought, I knew this would happen, sure as hell. He raised his head. "Impossible?"

"We will first land twenty ships. These twenty must be fully loaded and back in orbit before the next will land. We will use the first twenty air fields on your list."

Rothwell took a deep breath. "But I thought you wanted to get away as soon as possible! It will take at least an extra day to load according to your scheme."

"Will it?" Aku moved to go,

his lieutenant reached to open the door.

On an impulse, Rothwell stepped forward. "Commander, if you had a son would you send him away like this?"

Aku stopped, and looked directly at him with even, black eyes; then the gaze moved through and past him, to the window and the ship beyond. For a minute his expression altered, changing almost to one of pain. When he spoke, it was almost to himself. "My father loved his children more than . . ." He started as his lieutenant suddenly clapped a hand on his shoulder. The expression vanished. They left together, without looking at Rothwell or saying another word.

For several minutes Rothwell stared frowning at the closed door. He walked thoughtfully back to his desk, and lowered himself slowly into the chair.

He sat for a long time, trying to puzzle through the picture. Finally he stood and paced the room. "Suppose," he said to himself, "just suppose that not all of those hundred ships up there are really cargo ships. Suppose that, say, only twenty are. Then, after those twenty were loaded . . ." He swung around to look again at the long, slim silhouette poised high against the main runway. "With ocean vessels, it's the fighting ships that are lean and slender."

Bending over his desk, he nudged an intercom button with his finger. "Doc, how would one

go about trying to understand an alien's reactions?"

Philip's voice shot right back. "Well, Jim, the very first thing, you'd have to be sure they weren't exactly the same as a human's reactions."

Rothwell paused, startled. "It can't be, Doc. Why, if Aku was a human I'd say . . ." He stiffened, feeling the hair rise at the back of his neck. The short, curt answers, the refusal to meet his eyes, the frozen expression clicked into pattern. "Doc . . . I'd say he was being forced to do something he hated like hell to do."

Tensely, he straightened and contemplated the lean, gray spaceship. Then he whirled around and slapped every button on the intercom.

Thursday. The sun pecked fitfully at the low overcast while a sullen crowd watched a squat alien ship descend vertically, to finally settle with a flaming belch not far from the first. Similar crowds watched similar landings at nineteen other airports around the world, but the loading was to start first in New York.

An elevator-like box swung out from the fat belly of the ship and was lowered rapidly to the ground. Two golden-hued aliens, in uniforms resembling Aku's, stepped out and walked about a thousand feet towards the crowd. Only children actually being loaded were to go beyond this point; parents had to stay at the airport gates.

"When do I go, Dad?"

"Shortly, son." Rothwell laid his hand on the lean shoulder. "You're in the second hundred." There was a brief, awkward silence. "Martha, you'd better take him over to the line." He held out his hand. "So long, son."

Jim, Jr., shook his hand gravely, then, without a word, suddenly threw his hands tight around his younger sister. He took his mother's hand, and they walked slowly over to the sad line that was forming beyond the gate.

Rothwell turned to his daughter. "You going over there too, kitten?" The words were gruff in his tight throat.

She wiped a hand quickly across her cheek. "No, Dad, I guess I'll stay here with you." She stood close beside him.

Aku, forgotten until now, cleared his throat. "I think the loading should start, General."

Raising his hand in a half-salute, Rothwell signaled to a captain standing near the gate who turned and motioned to a small cordon of military police. Shortly, a group of fifty of the first youngsters in the line separated from the others and moved slowly out onto the concrete ribbon towards the waiting ship. The rest of the line hesitated, then edged reluctantly up to the gate, to take the place of the fifty who had left. They waited there, the children of a thousand families, suddenly dead quiet, staring after the fifty that slowly moved away.

They walked quietly, in a tight group, without any antics or horseplay which, in itself, gave the event an air of unreality. Approaching the ship, they seemed to huddle even closer together, forming a pathetically tiny cluster in the shadow of the towering space cruiser. The title of a book that he had read once, many years before, flashed unexpectedly in Rothwell's memory, *The Story of Mankind*. He looked sadly after the fifty, then back at the silent line. Were these frightened kids now writing the final period in the last chapter? He shook himself, work to be done, no time now for daydreams.

As the fifty reached the ship and started to enter the elevator, Rothwell turned and beckoned to some technicians standing out of sight just inside the entrance to the control tower. Three of them ran out and set up what looked like a television set, only with three screens. One ran back, unreeling a power cable, while a fourth flicked on a bank of switches, making feverish, minute adjustments. Rothwell felt the sweat in his hands. "Is it okay, Sergeant?"

The back of the sergeant's shirt was wet though the air was cool. "It's got to be, sir!" His fingers played across the knobs. "All that metal, the whole thing is critical as . . . Ah!" He jumped back. The screens flashed into life.

Aku stiffened. His lieutenant

gasped audibly, made a jerky movement towards the screens, then suddenly became aware of three MP's standing beside him, hands nonchalantly cradling bluntnosed weapons.

All three receivers showed similar scenes, the milling youngsters and the ship, but from up close, the pictures jerking and swaying erratically as if the cameras were somehow fastened to moving human beings. Then the scenes condensed into a cramped, jostling blackness as the fifty crowded into the elevator and were lifted up the side of the ship.

Next, were three views of a large room, bare except for what appeared to be overhead cranes and other mechanical paraphernalia of a military shop or warehouse. For a while the fifty moved about restlessly, then the cameras swung about simultaneously to face a wall that slowly slid apart.

Rothwell froze. "Good Lord!"

Six murky *things* moved from the open wall towards the cameras, which fell back to the opposite side of the room. Each was large, many times the size of a man, but somehow indistinct, for the cameras didn't convey any sense of shape or form. For an instant, one of the screens flashed a picture of a terrified human face, and arms raised protectively as the shadowy things moved in upon the group.

A projection snapped out from one, grabbed two of the hu-

mans, and hurled them into a corner. Then it motioned a dozen or so others over to the same spot. With similar harsh, sweeping movements, the group of humans was quickly broken up into three roughly equal segments. One of the groups seemed to be protecting someone who appeared seriously hurt. A black tentacle lashed out and one of the screens went blank. Then another.

The third showed a small group pushed stumbling through a narrow door, down a short passageway, and abruptly into blackness. Something that looked like bars flashed across the screen, then a dark liquid trickled across the camera lens, blotting out the view.

Eyes blazing, Rothwell whirled on Aku. "Throughout our history, Commander, humans have had one thing in common, our blasted pride! We will not turn over our young to slavery, and by hell if we die, we'll die fighting!" He jerked up his coat sleeve, barked an order into a small transmitter on his wrist, and, grabbing his daughter, threw himself flat on the concrete.

Hesitating only an instant, Aku, his lieutenant, and the MP's hit the ground as both spaceships vanished in a cataclysmic eruption of flame and steel.

Raising his head, Rothwell

grinned crazily into the exploding debris, imagining nineteen other ships suddenly disintegrating under the rocket guns of nineteen different nations. He saw Earth, like a giant porcupine, flicking thousands of atom tipped missiles into space from hundreds of submarines and secret bases—the war power of the great nations, designed for the ruin of each other, united to destroy the alien fleet.

He turned to Aku, "Midgits, volunteers with miniature TV cameras . . ." he stopped.

The commander and his lieutenant had flung their arms about each other and were crying like babies. Tentatively, Aku reached towards him. "Those things, the *Eleele*, from another galaxy." He struggled for words. "They captured your scout crew and implanted memories of thousands of ships to create fear and make it easier to take slaves before blasting you." He glanced up at the flashes in the sky. "This was their only fleet."

Rothwell glared. "You helped them."

Aku nodded miserably. "We had to. They thought you'd trust us because we look almost human. It was a trick that worked before." Tears streamed across his face, matting the golden fur. "You see, the radioactive planets your men reported, one of them was—home."

THE END

STAR MOTHER

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

*A touching story of the most
enduring love in all eternity.*

THAT night her son was the first star.

She stood motionless in the garden, one hand pressed against her heart, watching him rise above the fields where he had played as a boy, where he had worked as a young man; and she wondered whether he was thinking of those fields now, whether he was thinking of her standing alone in the April night with her memories; whether he was thinking of the verandahed house behind her, with its empty rooms and silent halls, that once upon a time had been his birth-place.

Higher still and higher he rose in the southern sky, and then, when he had reached his zenith, he dropped swiftly down past the dark edge of the Earth and disappeared from sight. A boy grown up too soon, riding

round and round the world on a celestial carousel, encased in an airtight metal capsule in an airtight metal chariot . . .

Why don't they leave the stars alone? she thought. *Why don't they leave the stars to God?*

The general's second telegram came early the next morning: *Explorer XII doing splendidly. Expect to bring your son down sometime tomorrow.*

She went about her work as usual, collecting the eggs and allocating them in their cardboard boxes, then setting off in the station wagon on her Tuesday morning run. She had expected a deluge of questions from her customers. She was not disappointed. "Is Terry really way up there all alone, Martha?" "Aren't you scared, Martha?" "I do hope they can get him back

down all right, Martha." She supposed it must have given them quite a turn to have their egg woman change into a star mother overnight.

She hadn't expected the TV interview, though, and she would have avoided it if it had been politely possible. But what could she do when the line of cars and trucks pulled into the drive and the technicians got out and started setting up their equipment in the backyard? What could she say when the suave young man came up to her and said, "We want you to know that we're all very proud of your boy up there, ma'am, and we hope you'll do us the honor of answering a few questions."

Most of the questions concerned Terry, as was fitting. From the way the suave young man asked them, though, she got the impression that he was trying to prove that her son was just like any other average American boy, and such just didn't happen to be the case. But whenever she opened her mouth to mention, say, how he used to study till all hours of the night, or how difficult it had been for him to make friends because of his shyness, or the fact that he had never gone out for football—whenever she started to mention any of these things, the suave young man was in great haste to interrupt her and to twist her words, by questioning, into a different meaning altogether, till Terry's behavior pattern seemed to coincide with

the behavior pattern which the suave young man apparently considered the norm, but which, if followed, Martha was sure, would produce not young men bent on exploring space but young men bent on exploring trivia.

A few of the questions concerned herself: Was Terry her only child? ("Yes.") What had happened to her husband? ("He was killed in the Korean War.") What did she think of the new law granting star mothers top priority on any and all information relating to their sons? ("I think it's a fine law . . . It's too bad they couldn't have shown similar humanity toward the war mothers of World War II.")

It was late in the afternoon by the time the TV crew got everything repacked into their cars and trucks and made their departure. Martha fixed herself a light supper, then donned an old suede jacket of Terry's and went out into the garden to wait for the sun to go down. According to the time table the general had outlined in his first telegram, Terry's first Tuesday night passage wasn't due to occur till 9:05. But it seemed only right that she should be outside when the stars started to come out. Presently they did, and she watched them wink on, one by one, in the deepening darkness of the sky. She'd never been much of a one for the stars; most of her life she'd been much too busy on Earth to bother with

things celestial. She could remember, when she was much younger and Bill was courting her, looking up at the moon sometimes; and once in a while, when a star fell, making a wish. But this was different. It was different because now she had a personal interest in the sky, a new affinity with its myriad inhabitants.

And how bright they became when you kept looking at them! They seemed to come alive, almost, pulsing brilliantly down out of the blackness of the night . . . And they were different colors, too, she noticed with a start. Some of them were blue and some were red, others were yellow . . . green . . . orange . . .

It grew cold in the April garden and she could see her breath. There was a strange crispness, a strange clarity about the night, that she had never known before . . . She glanced at her watch, was astonished to see that the hands indicated two minutes after nine. Where had the time gone? Tremulously she faced the southern horizon . . . and saw her Terry appear in his shining chariot, riding up the star-pebbled path of his orbit, a star in his own right, dropping swiftly now, down, down, and out of sight beyond the dark wheeling mass of the Earth . . . She took a deep, proud breath, realized that she was wildly waving her hand and let it fall slowly to her side. Make a wish! she thought, like a little girl, and she wished him pleasant dreams and a safe

return and wrapped the wish in all her love and cast it starward.

Sometime tomorrow, the general's telegram had said—

That meant sometime today!

She rose with the sun and fed the chickens, fixed and ate her breakfast, collected the eggs and put them in their cardboard boxes, then started out on her Wednesday morning run. "My land, Martha, I don't see how you stand it with him way up there! Doesn't it get on your nerves?" ("Yes . . . Yes, it does.") "Martha, when are they bringing him back down?" ("Today . . . Today!") "It must be wonderful being a star mother, Martha." ("Yes, it is—in a way.")

Wonderful . . . and terrible.

If only he can last it out for a few more hours, she thought. If only they can bring him down safe and sound. Then the vigil will be over, and some other mother can take over the awesome responsibility of having a son become a star—

If only . . .

The general's third telegram arrived that afternoon: *Regret to inform you that meteorite impact on satellite hull severely damaged capsule - detachment mechanism, making ejection impossible. Will make every effort to find another means of accomplishing your son's return.*

Terry!—

See the little boy playing beneath the maple tree, moving his

tiny cars up and down the tiny streets of his make-believe village; the little boy, his fuzz of hair gold in the sunlight, his cherub-cheeks pink in the summer wind—

Terry!—

Up the lane the blue-denimed young man walks, swinging his thin tanned arms, his long legs making near-grownup strides over the sun-seared grass; the sky blue and bright behind him, the song of cicada rising and falling in the hazy September air—

Terry . . .

—probably won't get a chance to write you again before take-off, but don't worry, Ma. The Explorer XII is the greatest bird they ever built. Nothing short of a direct meteorite hit can hurt it, and the odds are a million to one . . .

Why don't they leave the stars alone? Why don't they leave the stars to God?

The afternoon shadows lengthened on the lawn and the sun grew red and swollen over the western hills. Martha fixed supper, tried to eat, and couldn't. After a while, when the light began to fade, she slipped into Terry's jacket and went outside.

Slowly the sky darkened and the stars began to appear. At length *her* star appeared, but its swift passage blurred before her eyes. Tires crunched on the gravel then, and headlights washed the darkness from the drive. A car door slammed.

Martha did not move. *Please God*, she thought, *let it be Terry*, even though she knew that it couldn't possibly be Terry. Footsteps sounded behind her, paused. Someone coughed softly. She turned then—

"Good evening, ma'am."

She saw the circlet of stars on the gray epaulet; she saw the stern handsome face; she saw the dark tired eyes. And she knew. Even before he spoke again, she knew—

"The same meteorite that damaged the ejection mechanism, ma'am. It penetrated the capsule, too. We didn't find out till just a while ago—but there was nothing we could have done anyway . . . Are you all right, ma'am?"

"Yes. I'm all right."

"I wanted to express my regrets personally. I know how you must feel."

"It's all right."

"We will, of course, make every effort to bring back his . . . remains . . . so that he can have a fitting burial on Earth."

"No," she said.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

She raised her eyes to the patch of sky where her son had passed in his shining metal sarcophagus. Sirius blossomed there, blue-white and beautiful. She raised her eyes still higher—and beheld the vast parterre of Orion with its central motif of vivid forget-me-nots, its far-flung blooms of Betelgeuse and Rigel, of Bellatrix and Saiph . . . And higher yet—and there

flamed the exquisite flower beds of Taurus and Gemini, there burgeoned the riotous wreath of the Crab; there lay the pulsing petals of the Pleiades . . . And down the ecliptic garden path, wafted by a stellar breeze, drifted the ocher rose of Mars . . .

"No," she said again.

The general had raised his eyes, too; now, slowly, he lowered them. "I think I understand, ma'am. And I'm glad

that's the way you want it . . . The stars *are* beautiful tonight, aren't they."

"More beautiful than they've ever been," she said.

After the general had gone, she looked up once more at the vast and variegated garden of the sky where her son lay buried, then she turned and walked slowly back to the memoried house.

THE END



"Why should we break our necks sliding on those little slabs of wood?"

THE GALLERY

By ROG PHILLIPS

ILLUSTRATOR LLEWELLYN

Aunt Matilda needed him desperately, but when he arrived she did not want him and neither did anyone else in his home town.

I WAS in the midst of the fourth draft of my doctorate thesis when aunt Matilda's telegram came. It could not have come at a worse time. The deadline for my thesis was four days away and there was a minimum of five days of hard work to do on it yet. I was working around the clock.

If it had been a telegram informing me of her death I could not have taken time out to attend the funeral. If it had been a telegram saying she was at death's door I'm very much afraid I would have had to call the hospital and order them to keep her alive a few days longer.

Instead, it was a tersely worded appeal. ARTHUR STOP COME AT ONCE STOP AM IN TERRIBLE TROUBLE STOP DO NOT PHONE STOP AUNT MATILDA

So there was nothing else for me to do. I laid the telegram aside and kept on working on my thesis. That is not as heartless as it might seem. I simply could not imagine aunt Matilda in terrible trouble. The end of the world I could imagine, but not aunt Matilda in trouble.

She was the classic flat chested ageless spinster living alone in the midst of her dustless bric - a - brac - and - Spode in a frame house of the same vintage as herself at the edge of the classic small town of Sumac, near the southwest corner of Wisconsin. I had visited her for two days over a year ago, and she had looked exactly the same as she had when I stayed with her when I was six all summer, and there was no question but what she would some day attend my funeral when I died of old



Wherever he went Arthur felt the power behind the lens.

age, and she would still look the same as always.

There was no conceivable trouble of terrestrial origin that could touch her—or would want to. And, as it turned out, I was right in that respect.

I was right in another respect too. By finishing my thesis I became a Ph.D. on schedule, and if I had abandoned all that and rushed to Sumac the moment I received the telegram it could not have materially altered the outcome of things. And aunt Matilda, hanging on the wall of my study, knitting things for the Red Cross, will attest to that.

You, of course, might argue about her being there. You might even insist that I am hanging on her wall instead. And I would have to agree with you, since it all depends on the point of view and as I sit here typing I can look up and see myself hanging on her wall.

But perhaps I had better begin at the beginning when, with my thesis behind me, I arrived on the 4:15 milk run, as they call the train that stops on its way past Sumac.

I was in a very disturbed state of mind, as anyone who has ever turned in a doctorate thesis can well imagine. For the life of me I couldn't be sure whether I had used *symbol* or *token* on line 7, sheet 23, of my thesis, and it was a bad habit of mine to unconsciously interchange them unpredictably, and

I knew that Dr. Walters could very well vote against acceptance of my thesis on that ground alone. Also, I had thought of a much better opening sentence to my thesis, and was having to use will power to keep from rushing back to the university to ask permission to change it.

I had practically no sleep during the fourteen-hour run, and what sleep I did have had been interrupted by violent starts of awaking with a conviction that this or that error in the initial draft of my thesis had not been corrected by the final draft. And then, of course, I would have to think the thing through and recall when I had made the correction, before I could go back to sleep.

So I was a wreck, mentally, if not physically, when I stepped off the train onto the wooden depot platform that had certainly been built in the Pleistocene Era, with my oxblood two-suiter firmly clutched in my left hand.

With snorts of steam and the loud clanking of loose drives, the train got under way again, its whistle wailing mournfully as the last empty coach car sped past me and retreated into the distance.

As I stood there, my brain tingling with weariness, and listened to the absolute silence of the town triumph over the last distant wail of the train whistle, I became aware that something about Sumac was different.

What it was, I didn't know. I

stood where I was a moment longer, trying to analyze it. In some indefinable way everything looked unreal. That was as close as I could come to it, and of course having pinned it down that far I at once dismissed it as a trick of the mind produced by tiredness.

I began walking. The planks of the platform were certainly real enough. I circled the depot without going in, and started walking in the direction of aunt Matilda's, which was only a short eight blocks from the depot, as I had known since I was six.

The feeling of the unreality of my surroundings persisted, and with it came another feeling, of an invisible pressure against me. Almost a resentment. Not only from the people, but from the houses and even the trees.

Slowly I began to realize that it couldn't be entirely my imagination. Most of the dozen or so people I passed knew me, and I remembered suddenly that every other time I had come to aunt Matilda's they had stopped to talk with me and I had had to make some excuse to escape them. Now they were behaving differently. They would look at me absently as they might at any stranger walking from the direction of the depot, then their eyes would light up with recognition and they would open their lips to greet me with hearty welcome.

Then, as though they just thought of something, they would change, and just say, "Hello, Arthur," and continue on past me.

It didn't take me long to conclude that this strange behavior was probably caused by something in connection with aunt Matilda. Had she perhaps been named as corespondent in the divorce of the local minister? Had she, of all people, had a child out of wedlock?

Things in a small town can be deadly serious, so by the time her familiar frame house came into view down the street I was ready to keep a straight face, no matter what, and reserve my chuckles for the privacy of her guest room. It would be a new experience, to find aunt Matilda guilty of any human frailty. It was slightly impossible, but I had prepared myself for it.

And that first day her behavior convinced me I was right in my conclusion.

She appeared in the doorway as I came up the front walk. She was breathing hard, as though she had been running, and there was a dust streak on the side of her thin face.

"Hello, Arthur," she said when I came up on the porch. She shook my hand as limply as always, and gave me a reluctant duty peck on the cheek, then backed into the house to give me room to enter.

I glanced around the familiar surroundings, waiting for her to blurt out the cause of her tele-

gram, and feeling a little guilty about not having come at once.

I felt the loneliness inside her more than I ever had before. There was a terror way back in her eyes.

"You look tired, Arthur," she said.

"Yes," I said, glad of the opportunity she had given me to explain. "I had to finish my thesis and get it in by last night. Two solid years of hard work and it had to be done or the whole thing was for nothing. That's why I couldn't come four days ago. And you seemed quite insistent that I shouldn't call." I smiled to let her know that I remembered about party lines in a small town.

"It's just as well," she said. And while I was trying to decide what the antecedent of her remark was she said, "You can go back on the morning train."

"You mean the trouble is over?" I said, relieved.

"Yes," she said. But she had hesitated.

It was the first time I had ever seen her tell a lie.

"You must be hungry," she rushed on. "Put your suitcase in the room and wash up." She turned her back to me and hurried into the kitchen.

I was hungry. The memory of her homey cooking did it. I glanced around the front room. Nothing had changed, I thought. Then I noticed the framed portrait of my father and his three brothers was hanging where the large print of a bas-

ket of fruit used to hang. The basket of fruit picture was where the portrait should have been, and it was entirely too big a picture for that spot. I would never have thought aunt Matilda could tolerate anything out of proportion. And the darker area of wallpaper where the fruit picture had prevented fading stood out like a sore thumb.

I looked around the room for other changes. The boat picture that had hung to the right of the front door was not there. On the floor under where it should have been I caught the flash of light from a shard of glass. Next to it, the drape framing the window was not hanging right.

On impulse I went over and peeked behind the drape. There, leaning against the wall, was the boat picture with fragments of splintered glass still in it.

From the evidence it appeared that aunt Matilda had either been trying to hang the picture where it belonged, or taking it down, and it had slipped out of her hands and fallen, and she had hidden it behind the drape and hastily swept up the broken glass.

But why? Even granting that aunt Matilda might behave in such an erratic fashion (which was obvious from the evidence), I couldn't imagine a sensible reason.

It occurred to me, facetiously, that she might have gone in for pictures of musclemen, and, see-

ing me coming up the street, she had rushed them into hiding and brought out the old pictures.

That could account for the evidence—except for one thing. I hadn't dallied. She could not possibly have seen me earlier than sixty seconds before I came up the front walk.

Still, the telegrapher at the depot could have called her and told her I was here when he saw me get off the train.

I shrugged the matter off and went to the guest room. It too was the same as always, except for one thing. A picture.

It was a color photograph of the church, taken from the street. The picture was in a frame, but without glass over it, and was about eighteen inches wide and thirty high.

It was a very good picture. Very lifelike. There was a car parked at the curb in front of the church, and someone inside the car smoking a cigarette, and it was so real I would have sworn I could see the streamer of smoke rising from the cigarette moving.

The odor of good food came from the kitchen, reminding me to get busy. I opened my two-suiter and took out my toilet kit and went to the bathroom.

I shaved, brushed my teeth, and combed my hair. Afterward I popped into my room just for a second to put my toilet kit on the dresser, and hurried to the dining room.

Something nagged at the back of my mind all the time I was

eating. After dinner aunt Matilda suggested I'd better get some sleep. I couldn't argue. I was already asleep on my feet. Her fried chicken and creamed gravy and mashed potatoes had been an opiate.

I didn't even bother to hang up my clothes. I slipped into the heaven of comfort of the bed and closed my eyes. And the next minute it was morning.

Getting out of bed, I stopped in mid motion. The picture of the church was no longer on the wall. And as I stared at the blank spot where it had been, the thing that had nagged me during dinner last night finally leaped into consciousness.

When I had dashed into the room and out again last night on the way to the dining room I had glanced briefly at the picture and something had been different about it. Now I knew what had been different.

The car had no longer been in front of the church.

I lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of the bed. I thought about that picture, and simply could not bring myself to believe the accuracy of that fleeting impression.

Aunt Matilda had slipped into my room and removed the picture while I slept. That was obvious. Why had she done that? The fleeting impression that I couldn't be positive about would give her a sensible reason.

I studied my memory of that

picture as I had closely studied it. It had been a remarkable picture. The more I recalled its details the more remarkable it became. I couldn't remember any surface gloss or graining to it, but of course I had not been looking for such things. Only an expert photographer would notice or recognize such technical details.

My thoughts turned in the direction of aunt Matilda—and her telegram. Her source of income, I knew, was her part of the estate of my grandfather, and amounted to something like thirty thousand dollars. I knew that she was terrified of touching one cent of the capital, and lived well within the income from good sound stocks.

I took her telegram out of the pocket of my coat which was hanging over the back of a chair. COME AT ONCE STOP AM IN TERRIBLE TROUBLE . . . The only kind of terrible trouble Matilda could be in was if some swindler talked her out of some of her capital! And that definitely would not be easy to do. I grinned to myself at the recollection of her worrying herself sick once over what would happen to her if there was a revolution and the new government refused to honor the old government bonds.

Things began to make sense. Her telegram, then those pictures moved around in the front room, and the one she had forgotten to hide, in the guest

room. If the other pictures were anything like it, I could see how aunt Matilda might cash in on part of her securities to invest in what she thought was a sure thing.

But sure things are only as good as the people in control of them. Many a sure thing has been lost to the original investors by stupid decisions leading to bankruptcy, and many a seemingly sure thing has fleeced a lot of innocent victims.

Slowly, as I thought it out, I became sure that that was what had happened.

Then why aunt Matilda's about-face, hiding the pictures and telling me to go back to Chicago? Had she threatened whoever was behind this, and gotten her money back? Or had she again become convinced that her financial venture was sound?

In either case, why was she trying to keep me from knowing about the pictures?

I made up my mind. Whether aunt Matilda liked it or not, I was going to stay until I got to the bottom of things. What aunt Matilda evidently didn't realize was that no inventor who really had something would waste time trying to find backing in a place like Sumac.

Getting dressed, I decided that first on the agenda would be to find where Matilda had hidden those pictures, and get a good look at them.

That was simpler than I expected it to be. When I came out of my room I stuck my head in

the kitchen doorway and said good morning to her, and she leaped to her feet to get some breakfast ready for me. It was obvious that she was anxious to get me fed and out of the house.

Then I simply took the two steps past the bathroom door to the door to her bedroom and went in. The pictures were stacked against the side of her dresser. The one of the church was the first one. It was on its side.

With a silent whistle of amazement I bent down to watch it. The car was not parked at the curb in it, but there were several children walking along, obviously on their way to school. And they were walking. Moving.

I picked up the picture. It was as heavy as it should be, but not more. A faint whisper of sound seemed to come from it. I put my ear closer and heard children's voices. I explored with my ear close to the surface, and found that the voices were loudest when my ear was closest to the one talking, as though the voices came out of the picture directly from the images!

All it needed to be perfect was a volume control somewhere. I searched, and found it behind the upper right corner of the picture. I twisted it very slowly, and the voices became louder. I turned it back to the position it had been in.

The next picture was of the railroad depot. The telegrapher

and baggage clerk were going around the side of the depot towards the tracks. A freight train was rushing through the picture.

Even as I watched it in the picture, I heard the wail of a train whistle in the distance, and it was coming from outside, across town. That freight train was going through town *right now*.

I put the pictures back the way they had been, and stole softly from aunt Matilda's bedroom to the bathroom, and closed the door.

"No wonder aunt Matilda invested in this thing!" I said to my image in the mirror as I shaved.

Picture TV would make all other TV receivers obsolete! Full color TV at that! And with some new principle in stereophonic sound!

What about the fact that neither picture had been plugged into an outlet? Probably run by batteries.

What about the lack of weight? Obviously a new TV principle was involved. Maybe it required fewer circuits and less power.

What about the broadcasting end, the cameras? Permanently set up? What about the broadcast channels?

There had been ten or twelve pictures. I'd only looked at two. Was each a different scene? Twelve different broadcasting stations in Sumac?

It had me dizzy. Probably the

new TV principle was so simple that all that could be taken care of without millions of dollars worth of equipment.

A new respect for aunt Matilda grew in me. She had latched on to a money maker! It didn't hurt to know that I was her favorite nephew, either. With my Ph.D. in physics, and my aunt as one of the stockholders, I could probably land a good job with the company. What a deal!

By the time I finished shaving I was whistling. I was still whistling when I went into the kitchen for breakfast.

"You'll have to hurry, Arthur," aunt Matilda said. "Your train leaves in forty-five minutes."

"I'm not leaving," I said cheerfully.

I went over to the bright breakfast nook and sat down, and took a cautious sip of coffee. I grunted my approval of it and looked around toward aunt Matilda, smiling.

She was staring at me with wide eyes. She looked as haggard as though she had just heard she had a week to live.

"But you must go!" she croaked as though my not going were unthinkable.

"Nonsense, you old fox," I said. "I know a good thing as well as you do. I want to get a job with that outfit."

She came toward me with a wild expression on her face.

"Get out!" she screamed. "Get out of my house! I won't have

it! You catch that train and get out of town. Do you hear?"

"But aunt Matilda!" I protested.

In the end I had to get out or she would have had a stroke. She was shaking like a leaf, her skin mottled and her eyes wild, as I went down the front steps with my bag.

"You get that train, do you hear?" was the last thing she screamed at me as I hurried toward Main Street.

However, I had no intention of leaving town with aunt Matilda upset that way. I'd let her have time to cool off, then come back. Meanwhile I'd try to get to the bottom of things. A thing as big as wall TV in full color and stereophonic sound must be the talk of the town. I'd find out where they had their office and go talk with them. A career with something like that would be the best thing I could ever hope to find. And getting in on the ground floor!

It surprised me that aunt Matilda could be so insanely greedy. I shook my head in wonder. It didn't figure.

I had breakfast at the hotel cafe and made a point of telling the waitress, who knew me, that it was my second breakfast, and that I had intended to catch the morning train back to Chicago, but maybe I wouldn't.

After I finished eating I asked if it would be okay to leave my suitcase behind the counter while I looked around a bit. She

showed me where to put it so it would be out of the way.

When I paid for my breakfast I half turned away, then turned back casually.

"Oh, by the way," I said. "Where's this wall TV place?"

"This what?" she said.

"You know," I said. "Color TV like a picture you hang on a wall."

All the color faded from her face. Her eyes went past me, staring. I turned in the direction she was staring, and on the wall above the plateglass front of the cafe was a picture.

That is, there was a picture frame and a pair of dark glasses that took up most of the picture, with the lower part of a forehead and the upper part of a nose. I had noticed it once while I was eating and had assumed it was a display ad for sun glasses. Now I looked at it more closely, but could detect no movement in it. It still looked like an ad for sun glasses.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I heard the waitress say, her voice edged with fear.

"Huh?" I said, turning my head back to look at her. "Oh. Well, never mind."

I left the cafe with every outward appearance of casual innocence; but inside I was beginning to realize for the first time the possibilities and the danger that could lie in the use of this new TV development.

That had been a Big-Brother-is-Watching-you setup back

there in the cafe, except that it had been a girl instead of a man, judging from the style of sun glasses and the smoothness of the nose and forehead.

I had wondered about the broadcasting end of things. Now I knew. That had been the TV "eye," and somewhere there was a framed picture hanging on the wall, bringing in everything that took place in the cafe, including everything that was said. Everything I had said, too. It was an ominous feeling.

Aunt Matilda had almost had a stroke trying to get me out of town. Now I knew why. She was caught in this thing and wanted to save me. Four days ago she had probably not fully realized the potentiality for evil of the invention, but by the time I showed up she knew it.

Well, she was right. This was not something for me to tackle. I would keep up my appearance of not suspecting anything, and catch that train aunt Matilda wanted me to catch.

From way out in the country came the whistle of the approaching milk run, the train that would take me back to Chicago. In Chicago I would go to the F.B.I. and tell them the whole thing. They wouldn't believe me, of course, but they would investigate. If the thing hadn't spread any farther than Sumac it would be a simple matter to stop it.

I'd hurry back to the cafe and get my suitcase and tell the

waitress I'd decided to catch the train after all.

I turned around.

Only I didn't turn around.

That's as nearly as I can describe it. I did turn around. I know I did. But the town turned around with me, and the sun and the clouds and the countryside. So maybe I only thought I turned around.

When I tried to stop walking it was different. I simply could not stop walking. Nothing was in control of my mind. It was more like stepping on the brakes and the brakes not responding.

I gave up trying, more curious about what was happening than alarmed. I walked two blocks along Main Street. Ahead of me I saw a sign. It was the only new sign I had seen in Sumac. In ornate Neon script it said, "PORTRAITS by Lana."

I don't know whether my feet took me inside independently of my mind or not, because I was sure that this was the place and I wanted to go in anyway.

Not much had been done to modernize the interior of the shop. I remembered that the last time I had been here it had been a stamp collector headquarters run by Mr. Mason and his wife. The counter was still there, but instead of stamp displays it held a variety of standard portraits such as you can see in any portrait studio. None of the TV portraits were on display here.

The same bell that used to tinkle when I came into the

stamp store tinkled in back of the partition when I came in. A moment later the curtain in the doorway of the partition parted, and a girl came out.

How can I describe her? In appearance she was anyone of a thousand smartly dressed brunettes that wait on you in quality photograph studios, and yet she wasn't. She was as much above that in cut as the average smartly dressed girl is above a female alcoholic after a ten-day drunk. She was perfect. Too perfect. She was the type of girl a man would dream of meeting some day, but if he ever did he would run like hell because he could never hope to live up to such perfection.

"You have come to have your portrait taken?" she asked. "I am Lana."

"I thought you already had my portrait," I said. "Didn't you get it from that eye in the hotel cafe?"

"It's not the same thing," Lana said. "Through an eye you remain a variable in the Mantram complex. It takes the camera to fix you, so that you are an iconic invariant in the Mantram." She smiled and half turned toward the curtain she had come through. "Would you step this way, please?" she invited.

"How much will it cost?" I said, not moving.

"Nothing, of course!" Lana said. "Terrestrial money is of no use to me since you have nothing I would care to buy.

And don't be alarmed. No harm will come to you, or anyone else." A fleeting expression of concern came over her. "I realize that many of the people of Sumac are quite alarmed, but that is to be expected of a people uneducated enough to still be superstitious."

I went past her through the curtain. Behind the partition I expected to see out-of-this-world scientific equipment stacked to the ceiling. Instead, there was only a portrait camera on a tripod. It had a long bellows and would take a plate the same size as that picture of the church I had seen.

"You see?" Lana said. "It's just a camera." She smiled disarmingly.

I went toward it casually, and suddenly I stopped as though another mind controlled my actions. When I gave up the idea I had had of smashing the camera, the control vanished.

There was no lens in the lens frame. "Where's the lens?" I said.

"It doesn't use a glass lens," Lana said. "When I take the picture a lense forms just long enough to focus the elements of your body into a Mantram fix." She touched my shoulder. "Would you sit down over there, please?"

"What do you mean by a Mantram fix?" I asked her.

She paused by the camera and smiled at me. "I use your language," she said. "In some of

your legends you have the notion of a Mantram, or what you consider magical spell. In one aspect the notion is of magical words that can manipulate natural forces directly. The notion of a devil doll is a little closer. Only instead of actual substance from the subject—hair, fingernail parings, and so on—the Mantram matrix takes the detailed force pattern of the subject, through the lens when it forms. So, in your concepts, what results is an iconic Mantram. But it operates both ways. You'll see what I mean by that."

With another placating smile she stepped behind the camera and without warning light seemed to explode from the very air around me, without any source. For a brief second I seemed to see—not a glittering lense—but a black bottomless hole form in the metal circle at the front of the camera. And—an experience I am familiar with now—I seemed to rush into the bottomless darkness of that hole and back again, at the rate of thousands of times a second, arriving at some formless destination and each time feeling it take on more of form.

"There. That wasn't so bad, was it?" Lana said.

I felt strangely detached, as though I were in two places at the same time. I told her so.

"You'll get used to it," she assured me. "In fact, you will get to enjoy it. I do. Especially when I've made several prints."

"Why are you doing this?" I

asked. "Who are you? *What* are you?"

"I'm a photographer!" Lana said. "I'm connected with the natural history museum of the planet I live on. I go to various places and take pictures, and they go into exhibits for the people to watch."

She pulled the curtain aside for me to leave.

"You're going to let me leave? Just like that?" I said.

"Of course." She smiled again. "You're free to go wherever you wish, to your aunt's or back to Chicago. I was glad to get your portrait. In return, I'll send you one of the prints. And would you like one of your aunt's? Actually, when she came in to have her picture taken it was for the purpose of sending it to you. She was my first customer. I've taken a special liking to her and given her several pictures."

"Yes," I said. "I would like one of aunt Matilda."

When I emerged from the shop I discovered to my surprise that the train was just pulling into the depot. An urge to get far away from Sumac possessed me. I trotted to the cafe to get my bag, and when the train pulled out I was on it.

There's little more to tell. In Chicago once again, I spent a most exasperating two days trying to inform the F.B.I., the police, or anyone who would listen to me. My fingers couldn't dial the correct phone number, and

at the crucial moment each time I grew tongue-tied. My last attempt was a letter to the F.B.I., which I couldn't remember to mail, and when I finally did remember I couldn't find it.

Then the express package from Sumac came. With fingers that visibly trembled I took out the two framed pictures, one of aunt Matilda in the process of dusting the front room. All of her pictures that she had hidden from me were back in their places on the walls. While I watched her move about, she went into the sewing room, and there I saw a picture on the wall that looked familiar.

It was of me, an opened express package at my feet, a framed picture held in my hands, and I was staring at it intently.

In the picture I was holding, aunt Matilda looked in my direction and waved, smiling in the prim way she smiles when she is contented. I understood. She had me with her now.

I laid the picture down carefully, and took the second one out of the box.

It was not a picture at all, it was a mirror!

It couldn't be anything except a mirror. And yet, suddenly, I realized it wasn't. The uncanny feeling came over me that I had transposed into the mirror and was looking out at myself. Even as I got that feeling I shifted and was outside the mirror looking at my image.

I found that I could be in

either place by a sort of mental shift, something like staring at one of the geometrical optical illusions you can find in any psychology textbook in the chapter on illusions, and seeing it become something else.

It was strange at first, then it became fun, and now, as I write this, it is a normal thing. My portrait is where it should be—on the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, where the mirror used to be.

But I can transpose to any of the copies of my portrait, anywhere. To aunt Matilda's sewing room, or to the museum, or to Lana's private collection. The only thing is, it's almost impossible to tell when I shift, or where I shift to. It just seems to happen.

The reason for that is that my surroundings, no matter in what direction I look, are exactly identical with my real surroundings. My physical surroundings are duplicated exactly in all my portraits, just as aunt Matilda's are in the portrait of her that hangs on my study wall. She is the invariant of each of her iconic Mantrams and her surroundings are the variables that enter and leave the screen. I am the invariant in my own portraits, wherever they are. So, except for the slight *twist* in my mind that takes place when I *shift*, that I have learned to recognize from practice in front of my "mirror" each morning when I shave, and except for the portrait of aunt Matilda, I

would never be able to suspect what happens.

If Lana had taken my picture without my knowing it and I had never seen one of her collection of portraits, nor ever heard of an iconic Mantram, I would have absolutely nothing to go on to suspect the truth that I know. Except for one thing.

I don't quite know how to explain it, except that I must actually transfer to one of my portraits, and, transferring, I am more real than—what shall I call it?—the photographic reproduction of my real surroundings. Then, sometimes, the photographic reproduction, the iconic illusion, that is my environment when I am in one of the portraits of me, fades just enough so that I can look "out" into the reality where my portrait hangs, and see, and even hear the *watchers*, as ghosts in my solid "reality."

Quite often I can only hear them, and then they are voices out of nowhere, sometimes addressing me directly, just as often talking to one another and ignoring my *presence*. But when I can see them too, they appear as ghostly but sharply clear visions that seem to be present in my solid looking environment. There, but somewhat transparent.

I have often seen and talked to Lana in this manner, in her far off world, where I am part of her private collection. In fact, I can almost always tell when I

shift to my portrait in her gallery, because I am suddenly exhilarated and remain so until I shift back, or to some other portrait. That is so even when she is not there but out on one of her many photographic expeditions.

When she is there, and is watching me, and my thoughts are quiet and my mind receptive, she becomes visible. A ghost in my study, or the lab where I work, or—if I am asleep—in my dreams. Like an angel, or a goddess. And we talk.

Back in the physical reality, of course, no one else can hear her voice. My real body is going through its routine work almost automatically but my mind, my consciousness, is focused into my portrait in Lana's gallery, and we are talking. And of course in the real world I am talking too, but my associates can't see who I'm talking to, and it would be useless to try to explain to them.

So I'm getting quite a reputation as a nut! Can you imagine that?

But why should I mind? My reality has a much broader and more complex scope than the limited reality of my associates. I might be fired, or even sent to a state hospital, except for the fact that Lana foresees such problems and teaches me enough things in my field that are unknown to Earth, so that my employers consider me too valuable to lose.

If this story were fiction the ending would have to be that I am in love with Lana and she with me, and there would be a nice conclusive ending where she comes back to Earth to marry me and carry me back to her world, where we would live happily ever after. But the truth of the matter is that I'm not in love with Lana, nor she with me. Sometimes I think I am her favorite portrait, but nothing more.

But really, everything is so interesting. Lana's gallery where I hang, the museum where there are new faces each time I look out, and new voices when I can't see out, aunt Matilda's sewing room where she is at the moment, and all Sumac as she goes about her normal pattern of living.

It is a rich, full life that I live, shifting here and there in consciousness while my physical body goes about its necessary tasks, as often unguided as not. (What a reputation I'm getting for absent-mindedness, too!)

And out of it all has come a perspective that, when I feel it strongly, makes me feel almost like a god. In that perspective all my portraits (and there are many now, on many worlds and in many places on this world!) blend into one. That one is the stage of my life. But not a stage, really. A show window. Yes, that is it. A show window, where the *watchers* pass.

I live in a show window that opens out in many worlds and

many places that are hidden from me by a veil that sometimes grows thin, so I can see through it. And from the other side of that veil, even when I cannot see through it, come the voices of the watchers, as they pass by, or pause to look at me.

And I am not the only one! There are others. More and more of them, as Lana comes back on her photographic expeditions for the museum.

None that I have met understand what it is about as fully

as I do. Some have an insight into the true state of things, but very very few.

But that is understandable. Lana can't give the same time to them that she gives to me. There aren't that many hours in a day! And, you see, I am her favorite.

If I were not, she would never have permitted me to tell you all this, so I must be her favorite!

Doesn't that make sense?

I AM her favorite!

THE END



"There was this store—it had a sign 'Christmas Gifts'
—so I took some."

Do you listen to astronomers with respectful admiration? You never will again if you agree with this fact-founded blast against the...

STARGAZERS

By ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

FOR at least one and a half centuries and possibly for a couple of millennia we have been troubled by phenomena that, in these days, are described as flying saucers. Despite frequency of appearance and great number of observers, not all of whom were cretins, certain dogmatic astronomers have seen fit to pour scorn upon the notion that some if not all of these aerial super-constructions have come from another world.

The chief reason for this attitude is that such an idea flatly contradicts established astronomical dogma. The possibility of other life-forms reaching this planet and, what is worse, showing no interest in us when they get here, cannot be admitted without also conceding that the high priests of our observatories are living in a dream-world of

their own, a fanciful cosmos infinitely more fantastic than reality.

Dogmatists argue that no visitors could come from Venus or Mars, much less anywhere else, because at their nearest both are distant by immense spans requiring half a lifetime to cover. Besides, neither Venus nor Mars can support sentient life. Their atmospheres are too thick or too thin, too hot or too cold, lack this and lack that, and so on. Although they are little better than poor fish condemned to peer at the stars from the bottom of an atmospheric ocean—and will remain so until rocketeers get them out of this fix—the high priests of our observatories know it all. Their first concern is to defend their way of life, hallelujah and amen.

So they have pronounced that all observed phenomena incompatible with their dogma are imaginary, or examples of mass hysteria, or spots before the eyes. Note that astronomers never just "say" anything. They always "pronounce" in the same way that press reporters invariably "reveal."

Example (from our Special Correspondent): "Today I am able to reveal that Professor Schmootze has pronounced..."

For the sake of evening the score, let's take a look at how much our astronomical wise-aces know and how they got to know it. From here onward we shall be parading our ignorance naked and unashamed but don't let that fool you; we shall be making a pathetic exhibition of ourselves in the close company of our leading experts, assuming that they are expert and are leading something somewhere in some direction.

All astronomical estimates of distances in the solar and sidereal systems have been obtained by triangulation and checked by observed lags in light phenomena the velocity of which has been checked over distances obtained by triangulation. This means that a man can throw a stone more than a thousand feet from the top of the Empire State Building and therefore the Empire State Building is as high as a man can sling a rock. Or that buns are as big as elephants because elephants are as

small as buns. This is known as Finagle's Proof.

One baseline for triangulation is Earth's equatorial diameter. According to the oracles it has been determined to within fifty feet by high-grade instruments and expert calculations. Hayford's estimate: the radius is 6378.388 kilometers. In civilized language that's a diameter of 7926.68 miles.

Height of Mauna Loa as determined by high-grade instruments and expert calculations: by Cook, 18,410 feet; by Marchand, 16,611 feet; by Wilkes, 13,761 feet.

Everest was measured and calculated with great exactness as 29,002 feet. This figure was accepted for years as the official and indisputable one. Some naughty character must have doubted the implied claim to accuracy to two parts in twenty-nine thousands; Everest was recalculated with great looseness as being somewhere between 26,100 and 31,900 feet.

Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain, was measured and calculated to reach 18,800 feet. Then recalculated as somewhere between 19,000 and 20,300 feet.

By triangulation and expert calculation eight independent measurements of Mt. St. Elias produced results ranging from 12,672 feet to 19,500 feet. By barometric determination, 18,092 feet.

In 1938 Allan B. Crawford, member of a Norwegian expedition visiting Tristan da Cunha,

saw fit to doubt the charts of the British Admiralty Hydrographer, resurveyed the island and found the charts very much wrong. Whereupon newspapers "revealed" that "the island has been reshaped," a sweet way of telling us that the experts had been compelled to alter their charts without actually saying that. Timor has been "reshaped" twice and heaven alone knows how many more islands have got it coming to them.

The size and weight of the dog-carrying Sputnik 2 created alarm in military circles because it was thought that the satellite might be making a complete photographic record of all the terrain it passed over. Such a record, it was said, "would provide the Russians with invaluable data for the accurate ranging of their intercontinental ballistic missiles." This amounts to an admission that the Russians might miss a city the size of Chicago were they to rely solely upon ordnance survey maps created by high-grade instruments and expert calculations.

Geophysicists, who have little in common with either military brasshats or astronomers, hailed both Russian satellites as valuable contributions to the International Geophysical Year, saying that careful study of their orbits "will give us a far better idea of the true shape of the Earth." Presumably the planet itself may undergo "re-

shaping" despite having been measured to within fifty feet.

The gist of the comedy is that with instruments and triangulations and calculations experts cannot measure the height of a mountain nor determine the size and shape of an island—but if they are astronomical experts they can, by precisely the same method, ascertain the diameter of the whole world with an accuracy coming to the seventh place of decimals of one per cent.

The blunt and inevitable conclusion is that Earth's alleged diameter is an arbitrary assumption made to suit the convenience and mysticism of astronomers. All triangulations from an assumed baseline are meaningless extensions of that assumption.

Another baseline is what is called the diameter of our orbit, by which is meant the mean of the major and minor axes of our elliptical path around the sun. The obvious way in which to gain this figure is to measure the distance from Earth to sun and double it.

Methods that cannot measure mountains nor islands nor spherical diameters cannot be conceived as methods capable of measuring spatial distances. The astronomers would have us believe they can do it but by their works shall we know them.

Distances from the sun as measured by expert observation and expert mathematics: Kepler, 13,000,000 miles; Roemer, 82,000,000 miles; Huygens, 100,-

000,000 miles. Then "finally determined with great accuracy" as 95,298,260 miles. Until Foucault came along and pronounced it 91,000,000 miles, followed by Dr. David Gill with 93,000,000 miles.

None of these were corrections. Unlike ordinary people, astronomers never make corrections. They make "further refinements." For the sake of getting some sort of badly needed cooperation they set up a dogma-refinery in Paris in 1911. We are going to have some fun with this as follows:

Page 34 of *The Universe Around Us* by Sir James Jeans—There was a conference of astronomers in Paris in 1911. They "adopted" 92,870,000 miles as "the most likely value" for the mean distance from Earth to sun.

Page 227 of *The Universe Around Us* by Sir James Jeans—With microscopic slowness the Earth is drifting away from its primary and "exact calculation shows that its average distance from the sun increases at the rate of about a meter a century."

According to this we are asked to believe—nay, we are told to believe—that by "exact calculation" it is possible to identify an annual difference of one centimeter in a length of 92,870,000 miles which has been "adopted" as a "most likely value." If this be part of science it shall be defined: it is self-evident twaddle.

A thing with which dogmatic astronomy pins together its assumptions is the so-called velocity of light. By instruments and experts' calculations this value has been determined, so they say.

One way in which it was done was by noting the apparent displacement of Jupiter's satellites as observed from the nearer and farther sides of our orbit (or guessed-at mean of the major and minor axes) and dividing the recorded time-lag into the bald assumption to obtain a time-speed ratio said to represent the velocity of light.

More observations and more mathematics have brought the usual "further refinements" the latest of which—from Sweden—ups this imaginary value by another imaginary eleven miles per second.

The satellites of Jupiter are very eccentric in their orbital motions, so much so that they have undergone repeated obscurations of such unpredictable duration that their observed displacements provide a list of various values. All observations that have created figures in agreement with current dogma have been accepted, listed and published for the benefit of those easily awed by high priests. All other observations have been excluded. This is another version of Finagle's Proof.

Michaelson and Morley, perhaps leery of astronomical theology, or possibly hoping to acquire greater merit by seeing

a confirmatory vision, set out to determine a "more exact" value for the velocity of light. They tried to do it with tubes and mirrors. They failed, utterly and completely.

The dogmatists were disconcerted, but not for long. How to publicize this defeat as a victory? Einstein stepped in. Einstein said the reason why they did not get the result they "ought" to have got was because their method depended upon the existence of ether drift and that they had succeeded in demonstrating that there is no detectable ether drift. Result: another triumph for the experts. Michaelson and Morley, aided by Einstein, prove that there is no ether drift.

Determination to drill the facts in accordance with dogma can be carried so far and with such unashamed intellectual dishonesty that while reports of the Michaelson - Morley experiment originally described it as designed to find "an exact and demonstrable value for light's velocity" many of today's references to the same experiment present it as a clever and wholly successful attempt to prove the non-existence of ether drift and, of course, carefully exclude all mention of the real intention.

If any experiment should show that light has no velocity or has unthinkable motion or generally has any attribute it "ought" not to have, then that data will be excluded.

But blatant contradictions cannot be excluded; they can be "explained" in a manner that creates harmony in one direction only to set up half a dozen new idiocies in other directions. Then the idiocies have to be "explained." Some of the contradictions inherent in expert dogma are so violently antagonistic that the only thing the high priests can do about them is ignore them altogether and maintain a pretense that they don't exist. This is Finagle's Tenth Law: "If you don't want it, it ain't."

For example: for Einstein's exotic compositions to be consistent it is essential that the velocity of light should be the ultimate in cosmic velocities and therefore it is said to be the ultimate. Nothing can surpass it. Dogmatically, it is the limit.

The dogma of wave-mechanics postulates that light is composed of numberless wavicles that oscillate rapidly in a complex, undulatory path which, in section, forms what is known as Lissajous' pattern. The allegedly unsurpassable velocity of light is the axial speed of these composing particles which, according to experts' contradictions, cannot possibly cover their longer zig-zag path at speed greater than their forward motion axially, despite that the long undulatory path is traversed in exactly the same time as the shorter dead-straight path.

To simplify this picture let us imagine a drunkard staggering

to and fro across a street, from sidewalk to sidewalk, and covering three hundred yards in order to advance one hundred. Astronomically speaking, his velocity along the three hundred yards path cannot be greater than the speed with which he advances to one hundred yards even though both paths are covered in precisely the same number of minutes and seconds. We have heard theories less preposterous at the circus.

No expert has the remotest notion of what the speed of light might be in the realms of free space, unhampered by Earth's atmosphere and gravitational field. For ourselves, we question whether light or anything else can be said to have a cosmic velocity. If it has, it is velocity relative to what?

Up in the sky is the moon. Astronomers know very little about it. The moon is within plain sight of the common herd and it's not wise to pretend great knowledge of things within plain sight. Some yokel might check up and prove the experts wrong, as has happened before and will happen again.

Millions of light-years away (whatever that may mean) are faint flickers of light beyond close visual range of the proletariat. Astronomers know an awful lot about those.

Not long before the war there fell into our dirty little paws an astronomical paistache "explaining" why the moon is drifting

farther away. With lordly authority it said: "The process will continue until, at some time in the immensely distant future, our satellite will slip entirely from our gravitational grasp and we shall lose it altogether as Venus may have lost a satellite she once possessed." Rate of drift not mentioned but probably determined by instruments and expert calculations as one centimeter per annum.

Soon afterward we found another and equally authoritative article "explaining" why the moon is drifting nearer. "The drift will continue until in the far distant future our satellite will break up under gravitational stresses and the remnants will form a mighty ring around this planet in the same way that Saturn probably acquired its rings."

We mailed these two expert revelations to a high priest namesake—Dr. Henry Norris Russell—and asked him to pronounce once and for all whether the damned thing is coming or going. He replied, curtly, "The moon's orbit is eccentric." We replied, "You're telling us?" with which correspondence ceased.

It is what fortune-tellers in observatories call "the problem of the three bodies." The late Professor E. W. Brown, of Yale University, spent most of his lifetime upon it and some of his formulae were reputed to be the length of a book. Mathematically it cannot be solved by those who, mathematically, can solve the problem of the million bodies

not in plain sight. Distance lends computational simplicity.

Dogma has it that the moon raises tides. Tiffany Thayer, a sturdy heretic, spat in astronomical holy water by checking the year-in-advance predictions of the U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey against the automatic tide-gauge at the foot of Whitehall Street, New York, and published the result in the form of a chart covering the daily record from June 25 to July 25, 1937.

He comments, "The tendency of the fortune-tellers seems to have been to anticipate most extremes from fourteen to twenty minutes or more."—*Fortean Soc. Mag.*, October, 1937.

If the moon raises tides, then the experts who can measure the centimeter-per-annum extension of a mighty assumption cannot measure the moon's miles-per-minute orbital swing to within fourteen to twenty minutes or more. Alternatively, the moon does not raise tides. Mystics in observatories can have it whichever way they like but they cannot have it both ways: either their refinements are very coarse or else their dogma is cockeyed.

Strange lights have been seen upon the surface of the moon and with far greater frequency than laymen realize. The experts who by spectroscopy, guesswork and mumbo-jumbo can "analyze" mere pinpoints far beyond visual range of ordinary folk cannot analyze the lights upon

the moon. They don't know what they are. Neither do they know the nature of the bright streaks that radiate from some craters. We issue a challenge to professional astronomers. We point to the moon and say, "Refine us that!—never mind the rest."

They won't. Professionals rarely look at the sky. They are too busy poring over photographic plates and translating their evidence in terms of current dogma, or writing books in which data selected from a great quantity supplied by amateurs is drilled to conform with current dogma, all the rest being excluded and the whole fantastic flapdoodle expressed in terms suitable for a public that breathes with its mouth open and talks with it shut.

Noughts are the medicine for noodles. Stun them with noughts. If the average nitwit accepts the claim of exactly calculating a daily difference of a hairbreadth in an adopted immensity or a most likely enormity, he will swallow anything.

So: the temperature at the sun's center is about 6,000,000 degrees. No need to tell him what sort of degrees. Every day the sun radiates from its surface the amazing total of 4,000,000 tons; that will sink him—and he can't disprove it. The mass of the Earth is 6,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 tons. All done with instruments and expert calculations.

Dr. Shapley, a nought-user, says that about 1,000,000,000

meteors strike Earth's atmosphere every twenty-four hours but much more lavish noughtage is displayed by the high priest who roundly pronounces that a cubic centimeter of air near Earth's surface contains exactly 30,000,000,000,000,000 molecules. The specially inscribed dog-biscuit is awarded to H. Gordon Garbedian's *Major Mysteries of Science* in which Plank's Constant—always one of dogma's constant planks—is defined as no less than .0000000-000000000000000000655 erg-seconds. Carrying the expert measurement of a theory to twenty-nine places of decimals is a triumph of exact calculation.

A nice, round, smooth, layman-stunning figure, the nought. It is a circle, the mystic symbol of infinity. From a bird's eye view it might be the well of wisdom. It also bears strong resemblance to a halo. Experts are never tired of wearing it. They utilize it constantly.

We have a priestly work—by Ruby Ta'Bois, F.R.A.S.,—pronouncing that Halley's Comet “noteworthy for the length and brilliance of its tail, shows no deterioration during three centuries” despite that, according to the same authority, it “lost its tail in 1835 and again in 1910.”

Donati's Comet, which once had two tails, has since undergone this kind of “no deterioration,” leaving it with one. We have details of other comets that have been de-tailed and we have

data that, in these days, is excluded.

For example: in 1910, shortly before Halley's Comet was “officially due” to arrive, the high priests boosted its coming like drug manufacturers marketing a new laxative. It was, they pronounced, to be the spectacle of the century, a heavenly display of pyrotechnics put on by bountiful Providence to keep astronomy in the public mind. Millions turned out to enjoy the free show. New York took to its rooftops. The result was the flop of the century. One description was, “Less spectacular than a match scraped on the seat of somebody's pants half a mile away.”

To further illustrate the cus- sedness of comets, Biela's Comet split in two and the twin heads continued to rush through space side by side, within the sphere of each other's influence, but carefully refrained from rotating around a common center of gravity as according to astronomical theology they “ought” to have done.

They don't know whether the moon is coming or going, they don't know whether comets are coming or going and they don't know whether the galaxies are coming or going. For some reason beyond the uninitiated, they do know whether flying saucers are coming or going.

Einstein: There is a mutual recession of the galaxies. Proof: A shift of absorption lines of the spectrum toward the red

end. Cause: "Einstein effect" or a slowing down of physical processes at high velocities.

Hubble: There is not a mutual recession of the galaxies. Proof: A shift of absorption lines of the spectrum toward the red end. Cause: Loss of photon energy in space as "confirmed" by the "proved" existence of a cosmic cloud of calcium and sodium vapors.

Dr. Hubble of Mount Wilson is the expert who is said to have weighed the Great Nebula of Andromeda, pronouncing it to be 3,500,000,000 times that of our sun. Since the sun as a body floating freely in space has no weight of any sort whatsoever, we learn that Andromeda, also floating freely in space, has a weightlessness of 3,500,000,000 times nothing. Yes, we all know that weight is not the same thing as mass but what we are discussing are astronomical claims, as stated, and not astronomical quibbles, as pleaded.

Prof. Einstein is the expert who has postulated a curved space which, according to another aspect of his own distinguished daftness, cannot be curved except relative to something else.

The trouble with astronomy, which no astronomer will admit, is that by its very nature it does not and cannot lend itself to the recognized scientific method of logical progression from observation to theory to experiment to proof. Any astronomer can ob-

serve and theorize until the cows come home. Experiment is extremely limited, proof well-nigh impossible. These last two stages are and always will be solely for the astronauts.

With much reluctance one expert has conceded the fact. Prof. Van der Reit Woolley was asked what he thought about space travel. With all the assurance and authority of a British Astronomer Royal he pronounced it, "Utter bilge!" A few months later Sputnik 1 went up and the Russians talked about helping themselves to the moon. Up went Sputnik 2 and the Russians talked about eventual landings upon Venus and Mars. Some malicious bum chose this moment to put the same question to Prof. Woolley again. The Astronomer Royal now opined, with some distaste, that, "Space travel is strictly for the rocketeers."

This is known as the first side-step movement in Finagle's Jig.

To compensate for their shortcomings astronomers have created a complicated and often self-contradictory trade-theology, complete with gobbledegook, which they put over with all the authority of divine revelation. Not one branch of real science rivals astronomy in the dishonest practice of presenting mere theories in the guise of incontrovertible facts. Astronomy is often called "the queen of the sciences"—by astronomers and by nobody else. The description

may be accurate enough; it all depends upon what one means by "queen."

New Lands by Charles Fort: "The stars that were catalogued 2,000 years ago have virtually not changed, have changed no more than a little more nearly exact charting would account for; but, in astronomic theory, the stars are said to be thought of as flying apart at unthinkable velocity; so then evidence of changed positions of stars is welcome to astronomers. As for well-known constellations, it cannot be said that there has been change; so, with several exceptions, "proper motion" is attributed to stars that are not well-known.

"The result is an amusing trap. Great proper motion is said to indicate relative nearness to this Earth. Of the twenty-five stars of supposed greatest proper motion, all but two are faintest of stars; so these twenty-three are said to be nearest this Earth. But when astronomers take the relative parallax of a star, by reference to a fainter star, they agree that the faintest star, because fainter, is farther away. So one-time faintness associates with nearness, and then conveniences change and faintness associates with farness, and the whole subject so associates with humorlessness that if we are going to be serious at all in these expressions of ours we had better pass on."

A powerful odor of brimstone

and other hell-fumes is detected in priestly haunts when one offers evidence of meteoric selectivity.

If a meteor wallops the Earth near Comrie, Scotland, it is officially pronounced to be an isolated incident. Soon afterward Comrie gets another one and the dogmatists call it a coincidence. A third is another coincidence, a fourth yet another, and so on. How often must a coincidence repeat before it becomes a genuine phenomenon? An established occurrence?

There is a class of arrivals from space known as australites. Our data says they are meteorites resembling small spheres of dark, glassy substance that look as if they have rotated in molten condition while plunging through our atmosphere. As their name implies, they are peculiar to Australia.

But in the dream-cosmos concocted by dogmatic astronomers it is absolutely impossible for a long succession of meteors from one radiant to strike repeatedly on or near the same area of Earth's surface. Dogmatically speaking, it is completely impossible for any special type of meteorite to be peculiar to any particular portion of Earth's surface.

To admit otherwise is not merely to shake astronomy's leaning tower of dogmatic assumptions but to blow it headlong toward the stars that may be far or near, very near.

It means admitting that this

world of ours is not spinning on its axis while whirling along its orbit while whizzing with the rest of the solar system toward Vega. It means admitting the awful blasphemy that Earth is not partaking of the violent medley of motions attributed to it by the neo-astrologers.

Ben Hecht: "Has science by a process of maniacal exclusions of telltale data, of telltale phenomena, foisted an algebraic Mother Goose upon the world in the name of astronomy? Has reason by a process of bewildered refutation of significant, of vital evidence, buried itself in a morass of sterile superstition?"

Professor J. B. S. Haldane, F.R.S.: "The gap between science and ordinary life is artificially broadened by a few scientists who behave like so many magicians, and try to prove that science is mysterious, and a great many other people who do not want the ordinary man to know too much."

Charles Fort: "It is within the power of anybody who does not know a hyperbola from a cosine to find out whether astronomers are led by a cloud of

rubbish by day and a pillar of bosh by night."

For example:

Millikan: "Cosmic rays show that energy is being concentrated back into matter and the universe is a self-rejuvenating concern."

Jeans: "Science can give no support to such theories."

Eddington: "I am an Evolutionist, not a Multiplicationist."

Schroedinger: "We can obtain very valuable results without knowing what we are talking about."

Very valuable results being bread and butter.

Says or rather pronounces Sir James Jeans, "If we want a concrete picture of creation we may think of the finger of God stirring the ether."

To Jeans, that thought is concrete.

Considering the influences that made them what they are, it is in no way surprising that many of our most publicized astronomers are scientifically pious while almost all atheists and agnostics are piously scientific.

A boy's best friend is his mother.

THE END

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THE SPECTROSCOPE

by S. E. COTTS

THE COSMIC RAPE. By Theodore Sturgeon. 160 pp. Dell Books. Paper: 35¢.

Sturgeon is back again, and when he really hits his stride, as he does here, there are few writers who can match him. In this one he outdoes even himself in the sheer magnitude of the concept. Not only that, but the way he realizes his idea and the means he uses are worthy of the concept he builds. This is rare enough in any fiction, but almost non-existent in S-F where adventure usually reigns supreme.

In *The Cosmic Rape*, Sturgeon goes back to one of his pet ideas, the group mind, which he used to such good advantage in *More Than Human*. This time it is the story of the hive mind, directed by a Medusa beyond the stars which hoped to conquer all mankind through dropping its seed into one man. The idea is thrown into focus by showing tiny mosaic fragments of lives inextricably drawn into a pattern by the Medusa. In some writers this shifting of focus would be an easy substitute for any deep psychological probing of character. Not so with Sturgeon. His use of the shift is so skilful that he achieves tension but not at the expense of losing the reader's interest in each individual involved. This is especially noteworthy when one considers how extraordinary some of the characters are, without the added liability of their sporadic appearance in the novel.

This is highly recommended for all fans, and it's bound to convert all those who haven't reached that exalted stage yet.

NO PLACE ON EARTH. By Louis Charbonneau. 184 pp. Doubleday and Company, Inc. \$2.95.

Sturgeon's book, reviewed above, showed one method of telling a story without using a straight narrative. In Mr. Charbonneau's first novel we have another, the flashback. Unfortunately he is not wholly successful. The flashback has become such a common technique that it takes uncommonly careful handling to make it convincing. Here, however, the general impression is that the author has chosen the easy way out.

The book is unfortunate, too, in that it bears a certain resemblance to Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. We have an enemy of the state, the constant questioner, and glimpses of what brought the victim to his present sorry condition. There is also some of Orwell's

1984 in the hero who slid into revolutionary activities almost unwittingly and unwillingly.

In spite of these serious criticisms, plus a certain stiffness in the writing, there are worthwhile features in the book—the descriptions of the government and the prohibitions surrounding childbirth among them. These things constitute bright enough spots so that one becomes curious about the author's next book even though one gets impatient with this one.

THE YEAR'S GREATEST SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY. *Edited by Judith Merril. 255 pp. Dell Books. Paper: 35¢.*

At the risk of being accused of repeating myself each year, I must say that this is the best Judith Merril anthology to date. Part of the credit, of course, goes to Miss Merril for her discerning selection; but an equally large part goes to the writers themselves for making liars out of those who claim that the best S-F was written years ago. There is a marvelously whimsical tale called "The Wonder Horse" by George Byram and another of Zenna Henderson's lovely series about the People, called "Wilderness." Also included is a thriller, "The Fly," by George Langelaan from which a recent movie was made, and one of the best stories to come from Algis Budrys' pen, "The Edge of the Sea." There is a deliciously funny contribution by the late Henry Kuttner, "Near Miss" and two extremely moving stories by Rog Phillips and Avram Davidson, "Game Preserve" and "Now Let Us Sleep" respectively. As I said, this time each story is a dead ringer. All the other Merril marks are here, too—the introduction at the top of each story, and the list of Honorable Mentions at the back to provide other material for those interested in reading further. There is a new feature, also—a special non-fiction section in honor of the year "science caught up with fiction." As excellent as the individual articles are, I think it was a mistake to include them here. There was too much fine fiction that had to be left out because of space limitations.

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Dear Editor:

I just finished reading the November issue of *Amazing Stories* and I think that all the stories except "World Beyond Pluto" are very good. But "W. B. P." is just about one of the best Johnny Mayhem stories so far.

In the letter department you answered Mr. Buchalter by telling him that there would be a new series character coming up. Well, he just better be good to compete with Johnny Mayhem.

Rachel Train
2445 S.E. Pine
Portland 14, Oregon

● *How do you like Capt. Dark, in this issue? If enough fans give the thumbs-up signal on him, could be a new series hero in the making.*

Dear Editor:

In reference to the novel "Parapsyche": I thought that some of your readers would be educated enough to know that Lew Wetzel *did* exist. He was a pioneer (as the story says) and lived in Kentucky, West Virginia, and western Pennsylvania. In fact, he was so well known that there is a county in West Virginia named after him. It looks like Mr. Vance hasn't been reading his encyclopedia very much, lately.

Tom Milton
324 17th St.
Dunbar, W. Va.

● *One set of Brittanicas, coming up!*

Dear Editor:

I have been reading science fiction since about 1928. I like the idea of a complete novel in each issue. Short stories are fine, but they end too quickly—no time to really develop a plot and exploit it.

Richard A. Wood
U. S. M. C.

● *And you'll be getting a novel (or two equally solid long novel-ettes) in each issue, now that Amazing is set to be a giant 144 pages every issue.*

Dear Editor:

I have enjoyed the last three issues of your magazine to an (you should forgive the pun) amazing degree, primarily because of the novels. I am definitely in favor of a novel each issue, if the present standard can be maintained, or bettered.

Jack Vance's "Parapsyche" was his most minor effort to date, but since he is Jack Vance, even that means the story was far above what most other writers can achieve. However, I am one of those who believe that his best work was the collection "The Dying Earth," back in 1950, and have been slightly disappointed in everything of his since then.

It is hard to realize that "This Crowded Earth" is Robert Bloch's first science fiction novel, despite the number of years he has been writing in the science fantasy field. At any rate, it is one of the best s-f novels on the over-population theme that I've seen. Bloch is another author you must keep after for more material.

Ditto Marion Zimmer Bradley. I was much amused by the comment that Mrs. Bradley had "been away from our pages too long," and that this novel was "in the nature of a triumphant return." In point of fact, Mrs. Bradley has been away from your pages since 1949, at which time a short-short story of hers was printed in Rog Phillips' fan column! Perhaps this makes "The Planet Savers" that much more of a "triumphant return" after all. It was a fine, exciting, adventurous story, and very enjoyable. I have a few quibbles, mostly minor matters. I object to the terminology "matrix mechanics," for example, since that sounds too much like branches of science that could, and do, exist on earth, and has no exotic flavor at all. I was disappointed that the Trailmen, the tree-dwelling Darkovans, did not play a larger role in the story; they are an alien race with many interesting story possibilities.

As for a classics corner, *must* you? It seems that by now the good stories of the past should all have been mined for anthologies, and not need reprinting. If you do reprint stories from the past, I feel they should be the longer ones, not short stories. Say some of the Edmond Hamilton's novelettes.

Robert E. Briney
M. I. T. Graduate House 212
Cambridge 39, Mass.

● *We're still tabulating the flood of questionnaires we've received, and voting on the "classics corner" is neck-and-neck. It looks as if any decision we make will draw an equal volume of glad shouts and horrified moans. But there is good news for you—we have several more Marion Zimmer Bradley stories upcoming, ditto Robert Bloch, plus some surprises from other veteran names.*

Dear Editor:

I'd like to discuss art work in your magazines. For the most part I think it is improving, but I think also that there is still a lot to be done.

Gabe Keith is a welcome complement to the steady diet of Valigursky. Val is a great artist, no doubt, but when he is worked too frequently he often comes up with duds. Keith is good for stories aimed in the fantasy direction. He is a scintillating combination of Powers and Freas (if you can conceive of such a mixture).

How about more and better work from Virgil Finlay?

Tim Dumont
30 Munchausen Avenue
Bristol, Conn.

● *You're right on both counts: there's a lot to be done, and the art work is improving. We're in the midst, right now, of working out a new concept of covers; and we're also hoping to get Finlay and other top artists to complement Val's work.*

Dear Editor:

Basically, this is just another of the countless "doing fine job" letters I'm sure you receive monthly, but after filling out the personal opinion questionnaire in the October issue I felt I had to add a few lines.

I thoroughly enjoyed "This Crowded Earth"—both the basis of the story (which I believe is an insight to the near future) and the way it was written. All the short stories were fine.

A3c Roon Foss
U.S.A.F.

● *What is there to say except that we love you and we have no intention of letting you down. We guarantee that the future issues of Amazing will give you many hours of enjoyable reading.*

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NO MORE SEA

By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Meyer was Dictator, and Farson was King of the Rockets, and Sandra wanted a baby. Together they brought a dead world — and its dead Beings — to life. Together they suffered for their daring.

THAT was the year of the revolution, the year that the Council was overthrown, the year that the New Earth Party seized control. That was the year that, in desperation, the Colonists turned to desperate remedies. That was the year that Meyer rode high in the saddle, the year that Sandra Marin, more mystic than scientist, saw her theories put to the test, the year that Farson, farmer turned astronaut, woke the big ships from their centuries' long sleep in their closed orbit about the planet and drove out to the uncharted wilderness of the Belt.

It is hard for us, looking back, fully to appreciate the problems of our fathers. We have our problems, too, but they are of an altogether different nature. We are having to consider stringent measures to deal with an

ever increasing population with a consequent shortage of both living space and food supplies. We are not concerned, as were Meyer and Marin and Farson, with a mounting death rate and ever-decreasing birth rate, with what seemed to the orthodox scientists of that day to be the senility of the race.

We have our problems, but there is not yet the same urgency. The big ships hang in their orbits and the shuttle rockets are maintained in a state of readiness, but it is unlikely that we shall have to use them in our lifetimes. Should we do so, it is to be hoped that we shall not, as did Farson, reap a totally unforeseen harvest from the seeds that we sow. We were lucky that time. We may not be so lucky again.

Surprisingly little material

survives to give a picture of the days before the revolution. There are a few fragments of film, some age-yellowed newspapers, a file containing reports of the meetings, over a period of one Martian year, of the Council of Marsmen. It must be appreciated, of course, that there were more important things to save than reels of film and tape, scraps of paper.

Regarding the revolution itself, and what came after, we are more fortunate. Even with conditions as rigorous as they were at the time of the Return some of our fathers found opportunity to write. There is, too, the Log Book of *Star of Hope*, Farson's flagship. There are photographs of Meyer and Sandra Marin and Roy Farson, and recordings of some of the speeches made by Meyer, and most of the material set down by Farson in his private journal. Most, not all. Students of history will recall that one of the shuttles crashed on landing at the time of the Return and that much of its cargo of written records was destroyed by fire.

The photographs are interesting. There is one showing the three of them together. Farson is a typical Marsman, standing at least six and a half feet in height, all bone and sinew. He has faded blue eyes and a thatch of straw-colored hair. His features are so angular as to be just short of ugliness. Marin is a typical Marswoman, almost as

tall as Farson, long-limbed and slender. Her sullen expression matches the sullen smouldering of her almost red hair. Meyer, who is standing between them, is a little man, fat, with smudgy black eyes and lank black hair. He looks as though he has missed shaving for two days. He looks insignificant. And yet, at the same time, he dominates the picture.

The first volume of Farson's journal survives. In it he writes: There is great ill feeling in the Colony over the new Bill—the act making compulsory the rotation of wives and husbands. The absurdity of it all is that it merely tries to enforce what we have all been doing over the last few years; Sandra is my fourth wife and I am her fifth husband. We have decided that even though our union has been barren, as have been all the previous ones, we do not want to change. Meyer was round to dinner tonight. After the usual unsatisfying meal of processed yeast—it is a great pity that even the rabbits are affected by this curse!—we talked, mainly about the Bill. Sandra told Carl about her theory. He was rather impressed. He said that the main trouble is that we have tried to adapt Man to live on Mars and that we should have tried to adapt Mars to suit Man.

But where is all the water to come from?

A few days later there is another entry: The Council is trying to enforce the new law. Bill

Blackett and Susan Grant have already received prison sentences for refusing to allow themselves to be divorced. Sandra and I have talked things over and decided to stick it out—after all, they can't put over two-thirds of the population in prison.

Then, a week later: Carl was round to dinner tonight. He tells us that he is forming a party—the New Earth Party. He says that I should take more seriously what has always been a hobby of mine—the study of astronautics. He says that some of the junior engineers are with him and have already worked out ways and means of preparing the shuttle rockets for use. He says that it will be possible for the power plants to run on alcohol and that the reaction units can be refitted to the big ships. I asked him what all this had to do with his—and Sandra's—New Earth ideas. He replied that we had to have a sea, and that the early, uncompleted surveys of the Asteroid Belt had indicated that there were several sizeable planetoids that were practically nothing more than masses of ice. It would be possible, he assured me, for such ice masses to be dragged from their orbits and towed to that of Mars, where they would be allowed to fall to the old sea beds. The idea seems fantastic—but the virtual destruction of Earth and the migration of a few shiploads of survivors would have seemed fantastic to a man of an earlier generation.

There is a later entry in Farson's diary covering the first public meeting of the New Earth Party. It is admirably concise and, even, objective—but it leaves out too much. He knew both Meyer and Sandra Marin and knew what they stood for; there was no need for him to set down his impressions of them and their ideas in what was, so far as he knew, a private journal. Luckily, the next day's issue of *The Martian Chronicle* carries a full account of proceedings.

BACK TO THE SEA, it is headed. **MARS TO BE A NEW EARTH?**

Many of us, it begins, disapprove most strongly of the new law. It makes compulsory what, until now, has always been a matter of choice. The supporters of the Council maintain that the survival of the race must be ensured by whatever means are available, but have yet to prove that their new measure will be any more effective than have been the diets and injections of the past.

The new law has its enemies, and we make no secret of the fact that we wish them well. We make no secret of the fact that the warmest of our good wishes go to Mr. Carl Meyer and his new party—his New Earth Party. Not only does Mr. Meyer oppose this latest example of Council tyranny but he puts forward counter proposals that may well prove effective in rescuing our race from oblivion.

It was in a skeptical mood that

I went last night to the Guildhall, where the first meeting of the New Earth Party had been advertised as taking place. I have been to so many meetings. I have listened to so many speakers claiming that they had the right answers, the only right answers, to all our problems. There was Kravinsky, whom some of you will remember, who claimed that Man could become fertile on Mars only by becoming a real Martian, by living outside the Domes without clothing or breathing helmet. He and his wife tried it. I was there, at the airlock, the next morning when their stiff-frozen corpses were brought in. There have been the radiation cranks and the diet cranks and the rhythm cranks. To give all of them their due, they have all met with as much success as have the Council scientists.

And as little.

The meeting was not as crowded last night as I thought it would be. I realize now why this should have been so. Had it been billed as a protest meeting all of Marsopolis would have been there. As it was being held to propose constructive measures it had little appeal—the public, after all, is as tired of cranks as it is of the Council, supposing that any real difference between the two exists.

Music was playing as I entered the Guildhall. It was a piece unfamiliar to me—but I have always preferred our own music,

composed on Mars, to the music of Earth. It was unfamiliar, I had never heard it before—and yet it was familiar. There was something about it—a sense of rhythm, of fluid motion. There was something about it that pulled at the blood rather than at the brain.

"*La Mer*," said a man beside me.

"*La Mer*?" I asked.

"Yes. *La Mer*. The Sea. I wonder where Meyer dug that recording up. I thought that the Institute of Art and Culture had the only one on the planet."

There were three people on the platform. There was a little man—Meyer. He has about him that forceful air possessed by certain other little men of history. There was something about him—the pallor, the sullen expression, the black hair—of that Napoleon who was once Emperor of France. There was something about him of Commodore Tranter who, as we all know, organized the evacuation of the handful of survivors from a doomed Earth. He was wearing, of course, the uniform of his Guild, the sober black and white of the Clerks.

There was a man of average height, dressed in the green livery of the Farmers. Somehow, he didn't look like a Farmer—although for me to say so is to doubt the efficacy of the Aptitude Tests, and to doubt anything these days that comes under the aegis of the Council is tantamount to treason.

There was a woman in the green and scarlet of the Bio-Chemists—and the scarlet clashed badly with her auburn hair. That was Sandra Marin, the wife of Roy Farson, the man in Farmers' green. Once again, I venture to say, the Aptitude Tests went wrong. Sandra Marin should have been a poet, not a scientist. Sandra Marin *feels* rather than reasons.

Sandra Marin may well be right.

The music stopped and Meyer got to his feet. He spoke well, with a good choice of words and a carrying voice, a big voice, as the voices of little men so often are. His first words were such as to shock the audience—as, indeed, they were intended to do.

"Fellow Earthmen," he said, "and Earthwomen . . ." He waited for fully half a minute. "According to the Council we're Martians. Earth is just a little light in the sky, seen before sunrise or after sunset. Earth is something of a dirty word, too. Earth is the planet that got its soil and atmosphere poisoned by radiation and from which the favored few who were our ancestors contrived to flee in time. We've finished with Earth. We never want to see it again, save as a morning or an evening star . . .

"But is Earth finished with us?"

He paused again.

"I'm not going to launch any diatribe against the Council—

yet. They're doing their best—and a poor, fumbling best it is. Rightly, they put the well being of the race before the well being of the individual. I've no quarrel with that. What I object to is this—the new law *will have no effect whatsoever*, the new law merely makes compulsory what everybody has been doing, in and out of wedlock, ever since the initial panic about the steadily falling birth rate set in.

"We, of the New Earth Party, think that we have the answer. We may be wrong. Putting our theory to the test will be expensive. But I say this—When the continued existence of our race is at stake, *then damn the expense!*" He waited for the applause to subside—not that there was much of it. He said, "Miss Sandra Marin will now address you."

Sandra Marin got to her feet. She is a striking woman, with a good platform presence—this in spite of an obvious nervousness. She said, in a clear contralto, "Earthmen, Earthwomen—we must never forget that that is what we really are. That has been where the Council has gone wrong, in trying to adapt Man to Mars instead of Mars to Man.

"Most of you are familiar with the story of the evolution of life on Earth." (Here she was flattering her audience—I, for one, have only the haziest ideas on the subject.) "Life began, as you know, in the sea. The plants were the first to climb from the waters to the land and, over the millen-

nia, they prepared the way for animal life. By photo-synthesis the carbon dioxide was extracted from the atmosphere and free oxygen released. Then, at last, the first amphibians crawled ashore. Gradually they evolved, until they were capable of spending their entire life cycle out of the water.

"But . . .

"They brought the sea with them.

"The blood of all land animals duplicates the salinity of that primordial sea. Spermatozoa are free swimming organisms—as they were when fertilization was a submarine rite. The fertility of a woman was, when we lived on Earth, a tidal cycle. Why this should have been I cannot say—but it was so.

"Now we are on a world with no seas, no tides.

"Give us the sea—and we will again be mothers."

She sat down. Once more there was very little applause, but I could tell that the audience had been impressed. She had given them something to think about. After all, her theory was no more crackpot than many that had been given a sympathetic hearing by the Council. It was some little time before one of the audience got to his feet and shouted, "We'd give you a sea—if we knew how!"

The Farmer, Farson, got slowly to his feet.

"I can give you a sea," he said.

The man in front of me shout-

ed something coarse. Farson flushed.

"I can give you a sea," he repeated. "There's water out there, millions of tons of it. There was a planet out there, once, between Mars and Jupiter. We don't know what happened to it—perhaps we never shall. We know that it broke up. Its seas are there, drifting around forever, great globes of ice, among the debris of a world. To go out to fetch them in would not be an impossible feat of astronautics. It can be accomplished.

"We have the ships. We have the ships in which our ancestors came to Mars after the Final War. They're up there in our sky, requiring only the refitting of their atomic power plants, the re-establishment of their yeast vats and algae tanks, to make them spaceworthy. The shuttle rockets are here on the surface. I've inspected them. As little as two weeks' work should make them ready for use.

"We have already gone into the question of the atomic power units. As you all know, they were ferried down from the ships in the shuttle rockets and were used for the pumps and compressors, the lighting plants. But we can manage without them now. There are ample supplies of industrial alcohol, and the work that is now done by steam turbines can be done just as well by gas turbines. The gas turbines are already in existence. They were built at a time when the Council was considering discon-

tinuing the use of atomic power altogether . . ."

"What about crews?" shouted somebody.

"We have the books," Farson replied. "We have records. After all, handling a spaceship is only a matter of ballistics . . ."

"And how are you going to find these ice planetoids?" demanded somebody else.

Farson did not reply himself, but nodded to a man in the audience, who got slowly to his feet. He was an old man, and was wearing the silver tunic of the Dowzers' Guild.

He said, "I am a water diviner, and I am speaking on behalf of my professional brethren. Should the expedition to the Asteroid Belt be sent out, we shall be glad to cooperate in every way."

It was, I think, the Dowser who swayed the sympathy of the meeting to Meyer's New Earth Party. I don't profess to know what it was like in the old days on Earth, but Diviners, on this planet, are regarded with great respect . . .

So the report goes on. It is obvious that *The Martian Chronicle* lent its backing to Meyer at a very early stage. Subsequent issues contain articles by Meyer, Sandra Marin and Roy Farson. Subsequent issues have editorials highly favorable to the New Earth Party and attacking the Council for its refusal to consider seriously the proposal to bring seas to Mars.

Unfortunately, there is a gap

in Farson's journal at this period. The book may have been destroyed, although it seems more probable that he was too busy to write. It is certain that the Party membership was increasing rapidly and that Farson was playing a major part in its organization. It is certain, too, that he was making a thorough study of astronautics against the day when skilled spacemen would once again be required for the job ahead.

The actual cause of the rebellion is rather obscure. We know that the Council, yielding to public pressure, held a referendum on the New Earth Party's proposals. We know that the New Earth Party was defeated by a comfortable majority. The voting may, quite possibly, have been unrigged. Many of the Marsmen and Marswomen must have dreaded a failure of the compressors with the change-over from atomic to chemical power, must have dreaded the cold, dark nights in the event of the new source of electricity proving inadequate. Certain it is that the Council made the most of this quite possible hazard in its propaganda.

In any case, the Council was out to smash the New Earth Party. Roy Farson and Sandra Marin were lawbreakers, were still man and wife in spite of the Rotation of Partners Act. They had announced in public their intention of breaking the law. They were arrested one night, only a few hours after the an-

nouncement of the result of the Referendum.

Popular legend has it that Meyer led the attack on the prison. Popular legend is probably wrong. It seems certain that what Meyer planned that night was far more than a mere jailbreak—just as the storming of the Bastille was more than a mere jailbreak. The liberation of Farson and Marin, along with other prisoners, was a popular cause, and the New Earth Party made the most of it. But the plans for the uprising must have been laid weeks previously. There was, for example, the question of arms. As far as the Council knew, all weapons were in the hands of the Police—but Meyer's bright young Engineers (oddly enough, there were few Chemists among the original Party membership) had contrived to manufacture, in strict secrecy, large numbers of powerful, steel spring arbalests, a few hundred effective compressed air weapons and even, although these were not used until the later fighting, ingenious and deadly steam cannon.

Meyer, then, may have led the attack on the Central Jail, but it is more likely that he sat in some convenient headquarters, receiving there the reports of his various lieutenants. The assault on the prison was only one of the night's activities. There was the seizure of the Telephone Exchange. There was the attack on the Police Barracks. There was

the successful attempt to take over the Main Switchboard, and the unsuccessful one to gain control of the Compressor Room.

A few accounts of the fighting survive.

It was, it seems, a night of wild confusion. The most successful of Meyer's tactics was the switching off and on of the lights in various sections of the city at apparent random intervals. Apparently random—but it was done to pattern, and each of his officers carried with him a timetable and synchronized his actions with the irregular periods of light and darkness. There were, of course, battery-powered emergency lights—but the airguns and the arbalests made short work of them.

There was, inevitably, bloodshed. Some of the prison guards—those who were Party sympathizers—remained passive, others fought back viciously. Thanks to the stubborn attitude of the elderly woman in charge of the Telephone Exchange, and owing to the fact that her girls were more afraid of her than of the rebels' guns, almost the entire night staff was shot down in cold blood. The duty technicians at the main switchboard were, however, members of the Party, so there was no trouble there. Over half the engineers in the Compressor Room were Party members, too—but there was always a strong police guard over this vital organ of the city and, by a piece of unforeseeable bad luck, the Inspector in charge was

warned of trouble and was able to take prompt steps to circumvent it.

Even so, when morning came Meyer found himself almost in full control of the city.

Almost.

The Compressor Room still held out, as did the Police Barracks. The police in the Barracks were of little importance—they were outnumbered and surrounded, and their water supply had been cut off. Their weapons were no more effective for street fighting than were those being used by the Party. The tear-gas bombs upon which they had relied so heavily were almost useless—when every citizen possesses his own respirator, and regards it as normal an adjunct to everyday life as we regard an umbrella, gas has limited value.

The Compressor Room was of far greater importance.

It was the lungs of the city.

As I have already stated, every citizen possessed his own respirator, the tanks of which, fully charged, would supply oxygen for twelve hours provided that no violent physical exertion was made during that period. We can be sure that Meyer saw to it that all tanks were kept fully charged during the period of emergency. Meanwhile, he had been in touch, by telephone, with Inspector Wayne.

Van Huyten, in his *The Last Days on Mars*, writes as follows:

We were all set to take over the compressors at 2400 hours.

It was the usual thing to have tea made to coincide with the change of shift, at midnight, and it was the usual thing for the police officers to have their share of tea and sandwiches. Collis had the knock-out drops all ready to slip into the policemen's cups. Regnold and Bluttner, of the 1800 to 2400 shift, were to be put out of action, too—although they weren't Council sympathizers they were not in favor of the New Earth Party's plans. Ronald, Pettersham, Lorenzini and Dufay, of the next shift, were all Party men.

It was Clavering's cat that ruined things. This Clavering was a new recruit to the Police, and this was the first night that he had been on duty in the Compressor Room. He had brought his cat with him and, so scarce were pets on Mars, we all made much of the brute. It was a playful beast and enjoyed being the center of attention. Thanks to its antics Collis, officiating at pressure boiler, was able to dope the policemen's tea without any trouble at all.

"Felix likes tea," said Clavering.

Felix made a sound that sounded like "yes." Clavering took a cup from the tray, slopped some of its contents into the saucer. He put the saucer down on the floor. Felix sniffed it, touched the surface of the fluid with the tip of his pink tongue. It was still too hot.

Collis did his best. He contrived, with apparent clumsiness,

to tread on the saucer, breaking it and spilling the tea. He apologized to Clavering. He filled another saucer with tea from his own cup—only to discover that the policeman had found another saucer and had, himself, provided his pet with a replacement for the spilled drink.

Once again Collis was clumsy.

All might have been well, save for the fact that Felix was becoming impatient. The floor of the Compressor Room was clean, although not as level as it should have been. There were a few shallow depressions, in one of which the spilled tea had collected. Felix started to lap up the puddle of rapidly cooling tea then, with a peculiar snort, passed out.

Wayne and his men had the guns. Our own air pistols were stowed in one of the lockers under a pile of cleaning rags. There was shooting. Collis was killed, Lorenzini was badly wounded. (He died during the night.) When the shooting was over Regnold, Bluttner, Ronald, Pettersham, Dufay and myself had been handcuffed to stanchions. Regnold and Bluttner were later released, and went about their routine duties under Police supervision. Wayne did what he could for Lorenzini and tried to call a doctor. By this time, of course, the Telephone Exchange was in Party hands and communications were yet to be restored. By this time, too, the Compressor Room was in a state of siege. There were two attempts, I

think, to blow down the doors, but in each case those who tried to place the bombs were shot before they could do so. We heard the explosions as the bombs went off.

It was towards morning that Wayne had me unshackled from the stanchion. I thought of attacking him, of trying to grab his pistol, but I didn't get any further than thinking about it. My arms were paralyzed with an excruciatingly painful cramp.

"Mr. Van Huyten," he said, reasonably enough, "you seem to have been in the know regarding what was supposed to be happening tonight. What has been happening?"

"Suppose you ask poor Lorenzini," I said bitterly.

We both looked at the two bodies, over which one of the policemen had thrown a sheet.

"Or Collis," I went on.

"I can't ask them," he said. "I'm asking you."

"And I'm telling you," I told him, "that you'd better surrender to the Party forces. We hold all the city now, save for this one part of it."

"Save for this one vital part," he amended. "In any case, I shall never surrender unless I am ordered to do so by the Council."

"The Council," I told him, "is sitting safe and snug at Port Obolensky. They're worried, perhaps, about their own skins. They aren't worried about yours."

Just then the telephone bell

rang. Telling two of his men to keep me covered, Wayne went to the instrument.

"Inspector Wayne here," he said crisply. "Police officer in charge of the Compressor Room. Who's that? Central Committee Headquarters? Never heard of you." There was a long pause. I could hear the faint voice of the man at the other end of the line. I recognized it as Meyer's. "No," said Wayne suddenly. "No. I shall not surrender . . . Yes, you heard me. First of all, I have bombs planted where they'll do the most damage." (That was a lie.) "In the event of any assault on the Compressor Room being successful, those bombs will explode. Secondly, I'm stopping the pumps at 0800 hours. That will give you twelve hours to think things over . . . Yes, I think you'd better get in touch with the Council to try to make terms. The chances are that they'll hang only the ringleaders."

He hung up, returned to where I was sitting. His ruddy face was pale, his broad frame was sagging.

He said, "I'll do it, Van Huyten. I'll do it—make no mistake about that."

"But the compressors have *never* been shut down," I said desperately. "All the years that the city has stood, all the centuries, the compressors have kept running . . ."

"Then they could do with a rest," he said.

After that, save for intervals

during which he was called to the firing slots to supervise defense against new attacks by the Party militia, he tried to grill me on Party aims and policies. He even allowed himself to become involved in an argument.

"I'm a Police officer," he told me, "and I'm pledged to uphold and defend the present regime. But we'll ignore that side of it. We will concentrate on the fact that, on the whole, the Council has ruled wisely and well. Without a strong Council at the head of affairs Man would have become extinct years ago. The Council's scientists are working night and day upon the problem of sterility . . ."

"I can remember when I was a kid," I told him. "I can remember when we still had occasional steaks and roasts of beef. I can remember when pork and rabbit weren't the luxuries they are today. I can remember—" I looked at Felix, who had recovered and was lazily washing his glossy black coat—"when at least one family in every six had a cat and other pets."

"Sentimentality," he sneered. "It's you sentimentalists who have always, throughout history, done the most damage. And now we have all this sentimentality about the sea. Have any of you people worked out just what a huge drain this hare-brained expedition to the Asteroids is going to be on the Colony's resources?"

"We have," I told him, "and we consider the cost worthwhile."

"It will make no difference

whatsoever to the birth rate," he said.

"Then what are we supposed to do? Sit around until the Last Man finds the answer to the problem, and finds that the Last Woman has died of old age while he's been working on it?"

He looked at his watch.

"All right!" he snapped. "It's time. Respirators on. Put them on the prisoners, too!"

Regnold and Bluttner, not without reluctance, started to shut down. One by one the big pumps slowed to a stop. The throbbing whine that had been part of our lives for all our lives faltered and died. It was very quiet, frighteningly so.

Still, I reflected, the situation wasn't entirely hopeless. It would take an appreciable time for the air of the city to become really foul, and I knew that Meyer would think of bringing the emergency fans and the chemical purifiers into use. He would have considerably more time to think up a plan of campaign than the bare twelve hours allowed him by the capacity of the respirators' air tanks.

Then Bluttner—the damned traitor!—spoke up.

"This won't do, Inspector," he said. "This won't do at all."

"Why not?" demanded Wayne.

"Because there are emergency circulating fans and the chemical purifiers. To bring those fools outside to their senses we shall have to restart the exhaust pumps."

I watched his face as he spoke.

Bluttner was determined to be on the winning side—and he had made up his mind as to which side that would be. In his own mind Bluttner was already Chief Compressor Engineer.

"All right," said Wayne. "Start them."

It was Clavering, the young recruit, who tried to stop Bluttner.

"You can't!" he shouted. "You can't! There's no respirator for Felix!"

"There are more things at stake than the life of a cat," said Wayne roughly. "Hold him, Tranter and Gibbs, and let Mr. Bluttner get on with the job!"

Clavering stood silently, his face working. We heard the thin, high note of the rotors building up, we heard it becoming even thinner and higher. I couldn't see the gauges from where I was sitting but I could feel the change in pressure. My eardrums clicked painfully and I had to swallow to bring my hearing back to normal. I looked in fascinated horror at the cat. It stood on its hind legs, lashing out with its taloned forepaws at an invisible antagonist. There was a white froth around its mouth. It was yelling—but all that we could hear was a pitiful squeaking sound. It fell down then, and lay twitching on the floor. Its chest was still heaving convulsively when the rest of it was still.

"You bloody murderer!" said Clavering, looking down at the

body of his pet. He must have shouted it, but the words were no louder than a whisper.

"Grow up, Clavering," said the Inspector tiredly.

We realized that the telephone bell was ringing, had been ringing for some time. Wayne went to the instrument.

"Yes," I heard faintly. "Inspector Wayne here. Have you decided to surrender?" There was a long pause. I saw incredulity on the Inspector's face. It was replaced by horror as he listened to the accuser.

One of the men on guard at the door came running into the main engine room.

"Inspector!" he was shouting, "the Barracks must have fallen! They've got our women out there, and your son! They're threatening to pull their respirators off them!"

"I know," said Wayne in a dull voice. "I know." He picked up the handset again. "Do what you like—but I'm not surrendering! And remember this—you'll pay for every murder!"

"You'll pay, you swine!" said Clavering quietly.

In the excitement his fellow policemen had let go of him. Unnoticed, he had pulled his pistol. Now he used it. Even in the thin, Mars-normal atmosphere the reports of the weapon were deafening. Wayne died with his own gun half out of its holster. Bluttner died when a stray bullet wounded him and pierced his airline at the same time.

I was sorry about that. I

should have liked to watch him hang . . .

And so fell the last stronghold of the Council in Marsopolis. It is, as a matter of fact, the only item of real interest in Mr. Van Huyten's book—he seems, otherwise, to have contrived to have been elsewhere during every other event of consequence. He was, he admits, drunk at the time of the blasting off of the Water Fleet, thereby missing a superb display of pyrotechnics in the Martian sky when *Golden Hind* blew up. He managed not to be on the spot when the Water Fleet returned. He was drunk again at the time of the evacuation and had to be carried aboard the shuttle.

There is, however, a film in the Library of the Martian Institute. Some of you may have seen it. It was shot during the battle for Port Obolensky. In it we see Meyer, decked out in a uniform that is weighted down with gold braid. On each wide epaulette, in relief, there is a half globe of the Earth—one showing the Western Hemisphere, as it was, the other the Eastern Hemisphere.

(One of the interesting psychological sidelights of the Colonization is that the Marsmen never got around to building a decent telescope . . .)

Roy Farson is with him, and he is no longer wearing his Farmer's green. He is wearing a black uniform, with the single broad band of a Space Commadore on each sleeve and epau-

lettes similar to those worn by Meyer. It is interesting to note that he has not yet assumed, over his left breast, the winged rocket of the qualified Spaceman.

Sandra Marin is there. Like her husband she is wearing Spaceman's black, but it is relieved only by the touch of color on the epaulettes.

They are standing, the three of them, in the transparently walled, pressurized cab of a big tractor just outside the main airlock of Marsopolis. To the left of them is the white, gleaming plastic of the Dome. Behind them and to the right of them is the desert, wave after wave of ochre sand, broken only by a line of drab green marking the course of one of the subterranean trickles from the Pole that were, before Man had ever come to Mars, erroneously called Canals. Above them is the sky, black rather than blue, looking even darker by reason of the few, tiny white clouds reflecting brilliantly the rays of the morning sun.

They are standing stiffly, at the salute. In Meyer's bearing there is only pride and confidence. On Farson's face there is the shadow of doubt. On Sandra Marin's face there is a rapt look of dedication.

There is music on the sound track of the film—rhythmic and gusty, with drums and bugles predominating. There is, too, the cheering of men and women—and the growling and snarling of great machines.

The camera shifts.

We see, then, the long column of tractors, each with its make-shift armor, each with its cannon or rocket launchers. We see the gay, bright pennons fluttering from each tall radio aerial. We see, too, the big, clumsy shapes in the sky, the hydrogen-filled airships, the huge, flabby gasbags with the tiny gondolas hanging beneath them.

This, apparently, is not a film of a victory parade. It was actually taken on the day that the New Earth Party forces set out for the assault on Port Obolensky. Meyer—as is suggested by his appearance—must have been confident. He must have been determined that Posterity would have the opportunity to see what manner of man their savior was. It is a pity, perhaps, that neither Meyer nor any of those close to him ever made the spoken commentary that should be part of the film.

There is, of course, a short speech by Meyer. It contains all the usual platitudes employed on such occasions and winds up practically offering honorary membership of the New Earth Party to the Almighty. To us it seems absurdly bombastic—but, judging by the cheering, it must have been appreciated.

The battle scenes are the best.

There are aerial shots of Port Obolensky—a collection of shining domes in the desert and, standing to one side of them, the tall, silver towers that are the shuttle rockets. In a wide perim-

eter around the spaceport there are trenches and gun emplacements.

Meyer's air force is bombing the domes. Some of the bombs hit, but not all of them explode. Most of the bombs miss, throwing up great clouds of red dust. There seems to be sufficient wind to make both the handling of the clumsy dirigibles and bomb aiming difficult.

Meanwhile, the defenders are not without means of retaliation. First one of the airships is hit by a rocket, then another. There is no explosion. On Mars the hydrogen-filled balloons are almost as safe as are our helium-filled ships on Earth. One of the ships does burn, but it is no more than a pale, creeping glimmer of blue flame. The rescuing vessel is able to come alongside without danger. We see the airmen jumping from one gondola to the other, we see the bombs being dropped from the undamaged ship in a hasty, and successful, attempt to lighten her. There is no attempt to save the crew of the second ship. The rocket has hit her gondola, shattering it and spilling the broken bodies of her crew to the sand below.

The airships retire, save for the one in which the camera is mounted. It stays well clear of the domes, however, and well clear of the gun emplacements along the perimeter. Its camera shifts away from Port Obolensky to the horizon, and there we see the climbing column of dust that marks the approach of Meyer's

land forces. The camera shifts again, and we see a column of armed and armored tractors pouring out from the bigger of the domes.

The airship follows them at a discreet distance.

It is hard to make sense of what follows. All that shows on the screen is a boiling cauldron of red dust through which, at intervals, one sees gleaming metal bodies, the flash of explosions. Farson's account, contained in a letter he sent to his wife after the battle—apparently she did not accompany Meyer and her husband, they having decided that one of the three Party leaders should be kept out of harm's way—gives a better picture.

The airships were disappointing, he writes. They proved their value in reconnaissance, but in little else. They were too slow and too vulnerable. We lost two, the second one with all hands. I am hoping that you will be able to break the news to poor Wrigley's wife. Apart from the personal loss—he was a good friend to both of us—he had the makings of a first-class spaceman and I was hoping to take him with us as my second in command . . .

Well, we learned about the strategy and tactics of tank warfare the hard way. So much that was useless was brought from Earth that one is sorry that somebody didn't find space for a few, good authoritative histories of the Second World War, especially those dealing with the bat-

tles in the Western Desert. As it was, we had to make up the rules as we went along—but so did the Council.

Carl and I talked things over in the cabin of our "flagship" on the journey from Marsopolis. Carl, at first, favored making the approach in a long, single column, arguing that this would reduce the targets available to the enemy. I pointed out that this would mean that the column leader—ourselves—would be exposed to concentrated fire before being put out of action (or destroyed) and this would mean that our beautiful, long column would be just an animal with no head. I did not, I told him, disagree with the principle that military leaders should be exposed to as much risk as their men—but I was damned if I thought that they should be exposed to considerably more.

Rather to my surprise he did not fly off the handle. He was rather ashamed of himself, I think, for having forgotten to consider such elementary matters in his determination to strike while the iron was hot. Quite humbly he asked me for my opinion on the matter.

"Make the approach in line abreast," I told him. "That way we can bring every gun and rocket launcher to bear. That way we embarrass the enemy with a profusion of targets . . ."

"What if he comes out in line abreast, too?" asked Carl.

"In that case we're no worse off than we would have been if

we'd stayed in line ahead," I told him.

We started getting our reports from the airships then. We heard what a fiasco the bombing was—although I admit that the wind didn't help matters. We heard about the destruction of *Firefly* and *Dragonfly* and the death of poor Wrigley and his crew. We heard that the Council tractors were on their way out to meet us.

Carl showed his genius for improvisation then. He decided to keep our fleet in line ahead formation for as long as possible. He wanted the enemy to see us that way. (They, by the way, were maintaining a single column.) Then, using directional light beam communication, he flashed astern a message for four of the lighter and faster tractors to break formation and proceed to the head of the column. On hearing the executive word "Dog," given by radio, the four fast tractors were to weave back and forth across the column head over a wide front, kicking up as much dust as possible. On hearing the executive word "Cat" the remainder of the fleet was to open out to line abreast formation. Luckily the mechanics of this maneuver had already been discussed with all tractor commanders and a drill had been held.

We sighted the enemy as they topped the crest of a distant dune, and if we could see them we knew that they could see us. Carl barked the word "Dog" into

his microphone. The four dust screen tractors went merrily to work, and in a very short time we were ploughing through a fine, rusty-red fog. Carl picked up the mike again and said, "Cat!" We reduced speed then, of course, to allow the fleet to take up its new formation.

The operation was rather a shambles. Three of our tractors were put out of action by collision, and the language coming over the radio was shocking. Carl was furious and ordered strict radio silence. Luckily, the Council General didn't guess what was happening from what he overheard. He should have known—but soldiering is, after all, one of the almost lost arts. (Like astronautics.)

"Negative Dog," Carl was saying. "Negative Dog."

Three of the dust screen tractors acknowledged, the fourth one didn't. We found out afterwards that the enemy had opened fire and scored a lucky hit. We had, of course, neither heard nor seen anything.

The fog was thinning now and we picked up the leading Council tractor almost dead ahead. Our gunners opened fire—so did the gunners of our next abeam to port and starboard. The enemy was firing, too—but at a target far to our right. (The dust was hanging in banks and visibility was freakish.) Our first few rounds missed, then one of us scored a direct hit. The enemy seemed to jump a foot or more into the air, then just sat there

and *shuddered*. That's the only word that I can use. I hate to think of what was happening inside that cabin as the engine tore itself to pieces. The airlock door opened and one man scrambled out. His clothes were on fire, and went on burning even when he was outside. They must have been soaked in fuel. I was glad that the poor devil wasn't wearing a respirator . . .

They came blundering on, still in their line ahead, and we shot them up as they passed. Oh, we had our casualties, too, but nothing so heavy. And their High Command was gone—presumably the leading tractor was their "flagship"—and whoever was left in charge had even less idea than we had. What finally happened was almost funny. You have seen those ancient films that the Institute shows on high days and holidays—those ones called "Westerns." You remember the big scene in most of them. There are the white men in a tight little huddle behind their covered wagons and dead horses, firing at the Indians, who're riding round them in ever narrowing circles, blazing away with rifles and shooting off arrows and, as moving targets, suffering surprisingly few casualties from the fire of the whites.

That's the way it finished up.

More by luck than judgment we got the enemy bogged down in a hollow, and we ran round and round the ridges, letting fly with everything we had. We ran

short of rockets, but the steam cannon behaved well until we started to run short of water. Carl sent the airships back to Marsopolis for fresh supplies of ammunition, and he'd just given the order when we heard a strange voice coming over the radio.

"Hold your fire," it was sobbing. "Hold your fire. Hold your fire. We surrender!"

Well, that was the first hurdle surmounted. We should have liked to have pressed on to Port Obolensky—there was a lot to be said in favor of a night attack, and it was almost sunset—but the main problem was the ammunition shortage. So we had to stay put, hoping that the airships would be able to find us and that the Council had no tractors in reserve. (According to our prisoners they hadn't—but we couldn't be sure if they were speaking the truth.)

It was a pretty miserable night for all of us, especially the wounded. Tractors are all right as a means of conveyance from Point A to Point B, but they aren't designed for living in—especially after sunset. I don't think that I'd ever been so cold in all my life. It wasn't until almost dawn that the airships returned. (What were you people playing at in Marsopolis?) We lit the flares and watched their big, silvery shapes circling overhead, stumbling in the sand as we fumbled for their lines.

The sun was well up by the

time that we were reorganized. Carl, I think, was really enjoying himself, rushing hither and yon and barking orders. He, as you know by this time, hit on the idea of packing the wounded and the prisoners in those tractors—both ours and theirs—not sufficiently damaged as to be unserviceable but too badly damaged to be of further use as fighting units and sending them back to Marsopolis under airship escort. It would all have been elementary to any general in the old days on Earth I suppose—but, as I've said, military matters are a lost art to us.

The airships were used again—to soften up the perimeter defenses. At least, that was the intention—but judging by the volume of fire that greeted us as we approached Port Obolensky the results of the bombing must have been negligible. Our own fire was pretty ineffective, too. In the old days, I believe, they had special guns called mortars and howitzers for the reduction of land fortifications. We could have done with a few of them.

We left half a dozen of our tractors burning on the sand when we turned tail and scuttled over the brow of a high dune. Carl was very unhappy about it all, but was far from giving up hope. He decided to concentrate our fire on a half-mile-long section of the defenses, using the airships for artillery spotting. (I believe that that is the correct expression.) This had the defenders rather baffled. In effect, they were blind, while we were

not. Now and again their own fire would start to come uncomfortably close—when this happened all that we had to do was shift a few hundred yards to the right or left, back or forward.

At noon we tried again.

This time the light tractors were sent out ahead to raise, as they had done before, a dust screen. After a suitable interval we followed, in column, two abreast. We rolled down the slope almost out of control, seeing hardly anything in the red haze. I remember that we were almost on top of a gun emplacement when we crashed over the trenches, and that the gun was still firing—although, luckily, not at us. Then, ahead of us, we saw the white domes.

There was artillery mounted on top of them. We saw the flashes and the smoke. I made some remark about the wildness of the aim of the Council gunners to Carl. He grunted in reply, then started to give an order over the radio. "All weapons open fire on the nearest dome! All weapons . . ." Then—"Stop! Hold your fire! Hold your fire!"

I saw then what he had seen. I saw the flag moving jerkily up the tall staff—the black flag with the blue, green and gold globe of Earth. I saw, too, that the guns on the domes were firing not at us, but at the perimeter fortifications.

And that was that. We had Port Obolensky, handed to us on a silver platter by its own personnel. Not by the Council, not

by the Police—but by those who, even though they had never left the surface of the planet, had more claim to be called spacemen than I have. Carl still thinks, I know, that they changed sides only to save their own skins, that they turned on the Council when they saw that our capture of the spaceport was inevitable.

I don't believe this.

I prefer to believe what old Dimbleby, head of the maintenance staff, told Carl when he greeted us.

"Mister," he said, pointing to the tall, shining shapes of the shuttle rockets, "Mister, we've been looking after those blasted things all our lives. It's good to meet somebody who wants to fly them!"

And that, my dear, is all that I have time for. Young Timkins will be making the flight back to Marsopolis in a few minutes, and he'll be picking up this letter to deliver to you. It's a pity that you can't come out here—these rockets are fascinating things, although not as fascinating as the big ships will be—but somebody has to look after things in the city.

Au revoir, my darling . . .

Things moved swiftly after that. Meyer was Dictator—but his was a dictatorship that almost all the people accepted willingly. The Council had given them security—but had failed, over the long years, to give them hope. Meyer robbed them of security—there is little doubt that

the conversion of the power stations from the use of nuclear energy to that of chemical energy was a reckless undertaking. The engineers knew all about atomic power and weren't at all happy with the gas turbines that had replaced it. It can be said that the gas turbines were equally unhappy under their unsure masters. It would seem that power failures were of very frequent occurrence, so much so that the dome dwellers developed the habit of keeping their respirators ready at hand at all times.

Meyer was Dictator, and Farson was king of the rockets. Port Obolensky had been in the Party's hands for only twenty-four hours when he, accompanied by Dimbleby, took one of the shuttle rockets up for a test flight. Meyer, it seems, was furious—there were so many things to be done, including the trial and execution of the surviving Council members—and Farson was, after all, second in command of the Party. Mary O'Hara, in her gossipy book *Sea Change*, paints an interesting little picture of the events.

I was in the General's office, she writes, taking down notes. He was in an unusually pleasant mood. "They'll have to go, Mary," he told me. "All of them." (He was referring to the Council.) "I can't afford to keep them around. Too often in history revolution has been followed by counter revolution. That

isn't going to happen here if I can help it . . . Now, my dear, take down these names and details. Bryson, William. Charge—treason. Sentence—death." (Bryson had been Council President.) "Kroyitch, Paul. Charge—treason. Sentence—death. Lazenby, Peter. Charge . . ." He paused and laughed. I laughed with him. It was always advisable. "I bet you put down 'treason' as the charge. Well—it isn't. It's 'murder'. But the sentence is the same." (Lazenby was the old Chief of Police.)

We got that piece of business tidied up between us, then the General said, "I'm not happy about the engineers. I don't trust 'em. I still think that they changed over just to be sure of being on the winning side. We'd better get the Commodore along to see what he has to say about it—he's had time to sound them out by now."

So he rang for his orderly and told him to give Commodore Farson his compliments and ask him to step into G.H.Q. for a few moments. The orderly was away a long time and the General was beginning to get impatient. At last he came back.

"The Commodore sends his compliments, sir, and says that he's busy."

The General began to swell up, although the air pressure inside the dome was, of course, normal. Just then there was a sort of screaming roar outside, and we all rushed to the window. We saw one of the rockets lifted

slowly, balancing on its long tail of smoke and fire. It looked as though it were going to topple over at any moment. But it did not. It kept on going straight up until it was no more than a streak of white smoke against the almost black sky.

The telephone bell rang then, and I had to leave the window to answer it. There was a lot of nattering with the girls in the Exchange, they seemed to be very excited about something, and then I heard the Commodore's voice. "Is that you, Mary?" he asked. "I want to talk to the General." I said, "I think you'd better come see him, sir." He said, "I can't very well. I'm all of five hundred miles up . . ."

So much for Miss O'Hara. Like everybody else who lived on Mars in the last days of the Colony and who, after the Return, felt the urge to break into print, she was eye-witness to remarkably little of interest.

Meyer was Dictator, and Farson was the rocket king, and Sandra Marin was the propagandist. She went through the Library with a fine-tooth comb. She found books that had been neglected for generations and had thousands of copies printed and distributed free. All of them harped on one theme—the sea. There were novels by Conrad and McFee and Monsarrat that, luckily, had been brought from Earth at the time of the Evacuation (and that, even more luckily, were carried back at the time of

the Return). There was Melville's *Moby Dick*. There was Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us*, and that was the best propaganda book of all. All those reading it felt, as Sandra felt, that the sea was essential to the continuance of the race.

And the work went on. Farson and his bright young men learned how to pilot rockets—and, furthermore, learned without losing a single one of the precious shuttles, although one or two were badly damaged. The engineers stripped the power stations of their nuclear reactors—the reactors that had been stripped from the big ships and that were now being returned to them.

Farson and Dimpleby, with a work crew of a dozen, spent a week in Space, making the rounds of the six huge vessels hanging high in their closed orbit around Mars. Their names are familiar enough to all of us—*Star of Hope*, *Golden Hind*, *Waltzing Matilda*, *Mayflower*, *Alouette* and *Lili Martene*. All of them, with the exception of *Golden Hind*, are now in orbit around Earth. Maintenance crews visit them regularly—experience has taught us that they are, to Earth's population, what lifeboats are to the crew of an ocean-going vessel.

But Farson and his engineers were the first men in Space in generations. It is fascinating to speculate on their feelings (no records survive) as they clambered over and through the spi-

dery network of girders, as they entered the control rooms in which, once, the harshly competent Captains had sat, each of them absolute monarch of his own little world.

And how did they feel as they looked down—although there is no “down” in Space—to the vast, ruddy globe swimming in the emptiness? How did they feel as they looked out to the too-bright sun, the too-bright, unwinking stars? Were they frightened—as new recruits to the Maintenance Service are always frightened, as veteran spacemen are often frightened? They must have been. Man isn't made for Space, any more than he is made for strange planets. Man can endure Space—just as he, who has a long line of marine ancestors, can endure the land. Man can endure Space—but he doesn't have to like it.

After the initial survey Farson returned to Mars. There was so much to be done. There were the mathematicians to be bullied into the production of epemeræ for the newly trained navigators, there were the bio-chemists to cajole into a speedier production of the necessary yeasts and algae. Then there was the transportation of the reactors from the power stations to Port Obolensky, and the loading of them into the shuttle rockets.

The installation of the reactors in the ships was successfully accomplished. The provisioning of the big vessels went without a

hitch, and the manning of them. There is a fragment of film that shows the scene at the Spaceport as the shuttles blast off.

The black and gold uniformed spacemen and spacewomen are there, drawn up with military precision on the concrete apron. Standing a little to one side, somehow aloof, are the silver-clad Dowzers. In the foreground is Meyer—he is shaking hands with Farson and Sandra Marin.

The first crew marches smartly to the first of the waiting rockets, up the ramp into the slip. The ramp slowly lifts, becomes part of the shell plating. There are the first faint flickers of flame—then a roaring torrent of fire. The rocket lifts, accelerating rapidly. In seconds it is no more than a white vapor trail, twisted and contorted by the high level winds, in the blue-black sky.

The second rocket takes off, and the third. And the fourth . . .

At last there is only one rocket left. Meyer steps back, salutes Farson with a grandiloquent gesture. Farson returns the salute, stiffly and formally. With Sandra by his side he walks to the last rocket, follows his people into the ship. And then they are gone.

There is another fragment of film. It shows the night sky over Marsopolis. The familiar constellations are there, and the two tiny moons. Suddenly, casting a harsh brilliance over the desolate landscape, there is a streak of blue fire across the sky. It is followed by another, and another . . . Then, shockingly, a new star is

there in Orion, outshining Sirius. A new star? A new sun, rather. Slowly, very slowly, it fades.

That was the end of the *Golden Hind*.

The voyage to and from the Asteroid Belt is very well documented. Ships' records exist in profusion, also the journals kept by various members of the expedition. Farson writes the following description:

So we've made it. So we're up and out. There are only five of us now instead of the original six but we should manage all right, as long as there are no further losses. I see no reason why there should be—except for our inexperience—but we have yet to come to some conclusion about the fate of *Golden Hind*.

Inexperience it must have been in her case. Something went wrong with the reactor—that much is obvious. But *what* went wrong? It is a great pity that there were no survivors. Anyhow, all the engineers and watch officers are on their toes now and determined that there shall be no repetition of the tragedy.

Space is big. Reading about it, and watching the old films, I had no idea how big. It didn't seem so vast when we were doing the overhauling and the refitting—after all, the bulk of Mars filled almost half the sky. But now that the planet is only a ruddy risk dwindling astern, growing smaller with every passing second, I'm beginning to feel just a

little frightened. I mustn't let it show.

So wrote Farson, the Space Commodore. He was frightened, but was determined not to show it. He was not the only frightened one in the squadron. The expedition must take its place as one of the proudest exploits of Man—five ships, long unused, their real capabilities unknown to their crews, seventy-five badly scared men and women. Yet there was no talk, at any time, of turning back, no display in public of the private feelings that were shared by all.

Sandra Marin writes:

This is frightening.

I keep telling myself that it shouldn't be. It should be, I know, like coming home. After all, Space was the cradle of Life—the seeds of Life endlessly drifting between the stars, borne on the tides of light and gravity, falling on fertile worlds, into the oceans of fertile worlds. That's it. I keep trying to work out for my own comfort a similarity between Space and the sea. I keep trying—but it's not much good. After all, we're only a few minutes away from the sea, relatively speaking. Even relatively speaking we're millions of years away from Space.

Roy is frightened. I know it, although outwardly he is very much the Space Commodore. He's a stubborn brute—he won't admit his fear to me. Come to that—I won't admit mine to him. He insisted yesterday—we still keep to the fiction of days and nights

—that I accompany him on a tour of inspection of the outer hull. This lack of gravity is bad enough inside the ship—but inside we have bulkheads around us to give us the illusion of safety even though we do have always that horrid sensation of falling. Outside there aren't any bulkheads. Outside there are only flimsy handgrips and lifelines that look as though they would snap under the weight of a cat. Not that there's any weight, which is just as well. Or is it?

Anyhow, we went outside. My spacesuit was warm enough, according to the little thermometer among the other instruments on my wrist, but I felt cold. It seems incredible that one should feel so cold and still live. I was cold, and there was the continual dread of falling into nothingness, and then, when I had the sense to look away from the stars to look at the ship, there was the surprise that we should be such fools to trust ourselves to such a flimsy contraption.

Oh, she's big enough, but she's just a web of light girders surrounding the globes that are the pressurized compartments. The two shuttle rockets, each clamped in its nest, looked far more solid, far more *capable*. They look like ships. The ships themselves look like nothing so much as the balls of tumbleweed that drift before the wind across the Martian deserts.

Roy pointed out the others to me. Astern of us was *Waltzing Matilda*, close enough so that I

could just see a hint of structure. Astern of her were *Alouette* *Lili Marlene* and *Mayflower*, no more to me than just three more stars in the sky.

We went inside then. I wasn't sorry. From now on I look after my yeasts and algae and leave this playing at spaceman to Roy and the other men . . .

In spite of what Sandra Marin has written, it wasn't always the men that made the best astronauts. For example, in mid-voyage the Captain of *Waltzing Matilda* stepped down quite amicably in favor of his Bio-Chemist, who was a woman. The Chief Engineers of *Alouette* and *Mayflower* were women, as was the Navigator of *Lili Marlene*. All carried out their duties in an exemplary manner.

When, after weeks of plunging through emptiness, the fleet neared the Asteroid Belt the Dowzers came into their own. They were happy to have employment at last. Until the Belt was reached they had prowled miserably through the ships, holding before them their little pieces of twisted wire, pretending pleasure when they "found" by this means water tanks or pipes that they had known about after their very first practice tours.

Now, in each control room, the Dowzers kept their watch. They ignored the chatter of watch officers and navigators about looking for planetoids with high albedoes, relied entirely on the strange sense they had that bore

no relation to sight. They did not look through the ports at the planetary debris sweeping past—the pebbles and the boulders and the mountains. They ignored the cries of wonderment that greeted each sighting of some indubitable artifact—a great rock, perhaps, bearing upon it a ruined house, or a battered thing that seemed to be a wide-winged aircraft. Now and again they would insist that some brightly gleaming planetoid was not ice, and after one or two fruitless investigations of tiny worlds of white-gleaming mineral salt their advice was heeded.

It was Farson's Dowser who found, at last, what they were looking for.

"Commodore," he said, "steer for the Drift."

Farson, as he notes in his journal, was perturbed. What the Dowser referred to as the Drift was a mass of debris that, gleaming in the sunlight, looked almost solid. Farson was well aware of the essential flimsiness of his ship, of all the ships. To take the clumsy, almost unmaneuverable vessels into that maelstrom would be almost certain suicide.

Even so, inexperienced as he was in spacemanship, it did not take him long to make a decision. He ordered the shuttle rockets of *Star of Hope* to be prepared for use, sent instructions to the other Captains to do likewise. He took the first shuttle into the Drift himself. Sandra was with him. This is what she writes about it in her journal:

I had sworn never to venture outside the ship again, but this was different. The Belt hasn't the horrible emptiness of Deep Space. It has a dreamlike quality—dreamlike, but not nightmarish. It has beauty—but it is not the cold, hard beauty of the void between the worlds. It is like, almost, one of our Polar snowstorms—the swirl of wind-driven flakes gleaming in the sunlight. It was hard for me to realize that some of these "flakes" were bigger than the ship, were bigger than Phobos or Deimos.

We sat in the control cabin of the shuttle—Roy, little Willis, our Navigator, old Bartok, our Dowser, and myself. We felt weight again as we pushed off from the ship, as the chemical fuel of our rockets started to burn. Roy was busy, with little time for conversation. He steered us between huge boulders, around the flanks of what must once have been mountains. Once, unavoidably, he drove clean through a shoal of small debris—luckily there was nothing larger than a pebble, and luckily the velocity differential was small. Even so, the noise inside the cabin was deafening—and terrifying.

Old Bartok started to get excited. The twisted silver wire that he held in his two hands seemed to have a life of its own. Roy had to speak to him sharply, telling him that the shuttle rocket could only go round large masses of debris, not *through*

them. Yet even I could see that he was keeping us most of the time on the heading that our Dowser was indicating.

Then we saw it, looming up ahead—white and green and blue and beautiful. There was no mistaking it. Only ice could have that translucence, that shifting play of cool color. It was a sphere, a great sphere. There was a whole sea there, and it was ours for the taking—if we could take it. Beyond it were other, similar globes.

Willis used the radio to inform the other ships of our discovery while Roy came in for a landing. This wasn't easy, as the ice world had its own tiny satellites—some of them little spheres of frozen water, others of them rocks and similar debris. But he managed it and we hit the surface with only a slight shock. We put on our suit helmets and prepared to leave the shuttle. Roy insisted that I go first, saying that the idea of finding seas for Mars had been originally mine. I couldn't help thinking—and I'm afraid that it's very disloyal of me—that if Carl had been along he would have assumed that the privilege of first-footing it was his inalienable right.

I looked around me as I walked slowly down the ramp. On all sides, from horizon to horizon, the ice was perfectly smooth, save for the surprisingly neat crater melted by our exhaust as we set down. Overhead was the black sky, with the bright, tiny

sun and the scintillating motes that were the Drift. Five of those motes, I knew, must be the ships.

I waited at the foot of the ramp until Roy joined me there. I grasped his arm firmly, told him that together we would take the first step on to the surface of this new world. He allowed himself to be persuaded. What happened then was funny. We had forgotten the fact that ice is slippery. Our feet made the first contact—the second contact, a split second later, was made by our backsides . . .

That, then, was the first landing in the Belt since the explorations of Commodore Tranter. Tranter's ship had returned—he had commanded *Waltzing Matilda*—although Tranter himself had long been part of the dust of Mars. There had been no women in Tranter's crew so, even though she had shared the honor of first-footing with her husband, Sandra Marin was still, so far as her own sex was concerned, the first ever.

Visionary she may have been, visionary she was, but the records show that she was alive to the possible dangers that might lurk in the world of ice. She insisted on taking test borings, and these samples were carried back to the ship by the shuttle rocket. They were thawed, and sundry micro-organisms were discovered that had survived the aeons-long deep freeze. Lacking guinea pigs—it is a great pity that that humble useful animal

did not survive the Final War—Sandra experimented first of all with the yeasts and algae in her vats and tanks, then with herself. She was able to announce that, at least insofar as the first test borings indicated, the ice harbored nothing that would be inimical to Man or to his domestic plants.

Farson's problem was getting the ice worlds out of the Drift as a necessary preliminary to their long Sunward—and Marsward—fall. Towing was out of the question—even by the shuttle rockets—until such time as the frozen seas were out of the thick of the Belt. He called a Captain's Conference aboard the flagship and, during a meeting lasting several hours, the matter was thrashed out. It was Captain Meg Bowen, of *Waltzing Matilda*, who made the proposal that was adopted.

Her scheme was simple enough. This was to bore—or melt—suitably shaped holes in the surfaces of the ice asteroids and to pack them with the chemical fuel used by the shuttles. The tiny, frozen worlds were, in effect, to be converted into huge spaceships with rather limited endurance. Explosion of the charges at carefully calculated times would slow their orbital speed, causing them to fall out of the Belt. The effects of collision upon them—and they were bound to collide with all manner of debris whilst driving clear of the Drift—would be negligible.

It was, then, the turn of the Navigators to take over. Their calculations supported Captain Bowen's proposal. If all went as planned the huge masses of ice would fall free of the Belt at a time most advantageous for a powered orbit—they would be taken under tow by the ships—back to Mars.

Volunteers were called to man the primitive control rooms that would be set up in the ice worlds. One of them was Willis, Farson's Navigator. Like the majority of the personnel of the expedition he seems to have had literary ambitions and kept a journal. He complains:

It's a pity that I haven't, so far as I know, Eskimo blood. This is what living in an igloo must have been like. I could do with a whale blubber lamp . . . (I wonder if there are any whales, or anything like them, down in the ice . . . There's a fish of some sort staring at me through the wall . . . Ugly-looking brute . . . very ugly . . .)

Well, here I am, and I may as well make the best of it. I still think that the Old Man was wrong in insisting that these so-called control rooms be fitted with hot and cold—mainly cold—running atmosphere and every modern convenience. A man can live for a week in a spacesuit if he has to. It gets a bit smelly, of course—but at least his nose, not being frozen like mine is at the moment, is still capable of smelling. The main problem, of course, is air supply. With the present

set-up the air-reconditioning unit takes care of that . . .

Later he writes:

Have just fired the first rocket, right on time. I'm sorry that I couldn't have been on the surface to see it go off—it must have been rather spectacular. Not that results in here weren't spectacular. It reminded me of something out of one of those sea stories that Sandra peddled as propaganda when she was selling the sea back on Mars. It was like being in a submarine with depth charges going off all around. Very disconcerting.

A large piece of ice has broken out of one of the walls—and in it is the fish that I mentioned in my first entry. I'll turn up the heater a bit and leave him by it to thaw while I go outside to do some navigating.

The next entry is interesting:

The damned thing was alive! I came back after I'd taken my sights and there it was, flopping around on the floor. I went too close to it and it took a snap at me. Luckily I was still wearing my spacesuit—that thing has *teeth*. I've been in touch with the flagship and they tell me that Sandra is on her way here by shuttle.

The fish is finally disposed of:

Sandra and Kennedy, who piloted her in, have just left again. Sandra was in a very gay mood—although I am sure that her behavior was far from scientific. She had a knife with her, and she gutted the fish, which was dead by the time she got

here. She made a little fire with rocket fuel and used the aluminum lid of one of my equipment boxes as a skillet. She cooked the fish. Kennedy pointed out that it might be poisonous, but she said that she *knew* it wasn't and, anyhow, she was the Bio-Chemist. Kennedy said that it might be a valuable specimen and she replied that we should have the bones left, if nothing else. The bones were all that were left. Getting seas on Mars will be a great thing—but getting seas already stocked with such delicious food is something that we never dreamed about . . .

By the time that we had finished our meal it was time to fire the second rocket. I gave Kennedy instructions and went outside with Sandra. As I thought it would be, it was most spectacular. The actual blast was out of sight, being over the very close horizon, but the glare of it was refracted through the ice. It was like standing on a huge, beautiful opal. It lasted for seconds only. It should have lasted for hours.

When we got back inside we found Kennedy searching the fragments of dislodged ice for more fish. Unluckily for us, there weren't any.

So that—although Mr. Willis refrains from stressing the point, was the first fish fry in centuries. There are those who accuse the chroniclers of the expedition of having been overly concerned with trivialities, but I

cannot agree with them. Who, in the final analysis, is to say what is trivial and what is not? Admittedly the fish incident does seem to have been trivial—but it should not have been. It should have warned Farson, and it should have warned Sandra Marin, especially Sandra Marin.

It did not.

Be that as it may, the carefully timed rocket blasts were having their effect. Outside the Drift hung the big ships, each with its attendant pair of shuttle rockets. Outside the Drift Farson waited, and his Captains with him, listening to the radio reports from the dirigible planetoids, trying to plot their tracks on the 3D chart. Now and again Farson would leave Captain Meg Bowen in temporary command of the squadron and take a shuttle into the Drift to make a personal inspection of progress. He notes in his diary that the entire operation went with astonishing smoothness and that the worst part of it all was the waiting.

They broke out of the Drift at last—the five great, white shining spheres, like bubbles floating up from a raging torrent. Their surfaces were no longer smooth but were scarred by the rocket blasts, were pitted by the innumerable collisions that they had sustained. But they were out and clear and, left to themselves, would fall into cometary orbits around the sun.

There was much blasting back and forth of the shuttles, and the planting of the especially design-

ed anchors deep into the ice, and the passing of towlines. Gently, very gently, the big ships started to move from their orbits. Slowly, very slowly, the strain came on the hawsers. Nothing parted. The anchors held.

Gradually, carefully, the big ships pulled away from the Belt, shaping their orbits for Mars. Congratulatory messages flashed between them. Farson ordered the splicing of the main brace—although it is doubtful if he knew the origin of the expression. His radio operator succeeded in getting a message through to the home planet reporting the success, so far, of the mission. In his reply Meyer displays what was, for him, a rare sense of humor. "I will declare a public holiday on your return," he sent. "A seaside holiday."

"The holiday," replied Farson, "will be worth waiting for."

It was, of course, a long wait. Even under continuous drive the distance between planetary orbits cannot be bridged in days. It was a long wait, but for those in the ships the time did not drag. Navigation became a full-time job, inequalities in the lengths of the towing wires causing all manner of unexpected and irregular deviations from orbit. The Engineers, too, were kept on their toes. As for the Bio-Chemists, they had collected enough samples of life before the tow commenced to keep them happy for at least a year longer than the estimated duration of the trip.

Farson occupied himself with astronomical observations — the flagship boasted a big refractor far superior to anything that had ever been built in Mars. He became especially interested when Earth swam into view from behind the Sun. Sandra Marin writes that one day she came into the ship's observatory to find her husband looking very puzzled. He moved away from the telescope, told her to look through the eyepiece. The instrument was trained on Earth.

"Now," he told her, "look at my epaulettes."

She thought at first, she says, that he had gone mad. She realized then that he wanted her to look at the little, half globes of Earth that were the insignia of the New Earth Party. She saw what had puzzled him.

"Of course," she writes, "none of us had ever bothered to check the designs. We had assumed that Levinsky could be trusted to work from the globe in the Institute. I suppose that when we tackle him about the difference between his pretty little hemispheres and what Earth really is like, he'll plead artistic license . . ."

Then Mars bulked bigger and ever bigger in the sky, and Earth was forgotten. Messages between the flagship and the planet flickered back and forth. The Syrtis Major area had been evacuated in readiness. All low-lying ground had been evacuated. The spaceport had been prepared for the reception of the shuttle rockets.

All that could possibly be done, had been done.

It is not hard for us to imagine the wild excitement on Mars when the lights in the night sky first became visible. There were the five faint stars that were the ships, the five brighter ones that were the planetoids. Night after night they grew brighter until, at the finish, they were brighter than the insignificant moons of Mars. Then the sky was alive with the flare of rockets as the fleet threw itself into its closed orbit around the planet—the light all the more dazzling from being reflected from the great masses of ice. It was a brilliant sign of hope.

There is no film record of the fall of the frozen seas. We know how the feat was accomplished—the towlines were transferred from the ships to the shuttle rockets, and the shuttles pulled gently against the direction of revolution. This much is obvious—Farson and his crews were the veriest greenhorns when they set out from Mars; they were seasoned astronauts when they returned from the Belt. They could—and did—juggle with tremendous forces and stupendous weights with confidence. They even, incredible though this may seem, used the grazing ellipse technique so that each planetoid, when at last it fell with remotely controlled braking jets blazing, had already been slowed down considerably by repeated contacts with the thin atmosphere.

Each of them, too, fell well within the target area.

"We were not so concerned," writes Sandra Marin, "with the possibility of damage to the planet as with the probability of damage to any highly developed life forms within the ice. Having discovered that the frozen seas held a variety of edible fishes and molluscs and crustacea—not dead but in a state of suspended animation—we were determined to do all that we could to preserve this excellent source of tasty and nutritious food. By the time that we had returned to Mars I had, even, made plans for an oxygenation plant for the water, although I was not sure that this would be necessary. Our researchers had indicated that the fifth planet must have been as deficient in free oxygen as is Mars itself . . ."

(Perhaps that first fish fry in the control room hacked out of the ice did influence the course of history!)

When the last planetoid had fallen the shuttle rockets landed. Meyer was at Port Obolensky to greet Farson and Marin. There was, it seems, to have been a reception on a grand scale, with speeches and music, but the returned water hunters wished, before all else, to look at their new sea. After a very short delay the three Party leaders boarded an airship and were flown to Syrtis Major. For most of the journey they were buffeted by strong gusty winds and visibility was

reduced by streamers and banks of fog. There was a raw dampness to the air and a tang of salt that penetrated their respirators. It was a smell that is familiar to all of us but that was rich and strange to the Marsmen.

When the airship reached Syrtis Major, Meyer—he was an impatient man—was disappointed. He had expected to find a sea, a real sea, already in existence. What he found was a great new mountain range, an enormous pile of icy rubble, sharp, crystalline peaks lifted high against the unnaturally cloudy sky. At the edges of the vast area, however, the sand was dark and a few gleaming pools of water had already formed.

Meyer was even more disappointed when he was told that the night cold would, at first, undo most of the work of the daytime sun. "But," Sandra told him, "it won't always be like this. Once the sea has thawed it will have its effect upon the climate."

Slowly—too slowly for the impatient Meyer—the thaw continued. Day by day the icy peaks melted down, day by day the water spread further over the plain. Fish appeared, and weeds, and both, to Sandra's delight, seemed capable of adapting themselves to Martian conditions. And there were clouds in the sky—real clouds, heavy banks of cumulus that looked like those depicted in paintings and photographs of the skies of Earth. There were night frosts

and morning fogs. There were, even, showers of rain.

And then—Syrtris Major was a sea at last. A few dazzlingly white bergs still floated on its surface—but it was a sea. Its beaches were places of pilgrimage to which all who could spare the time came, by tractor or airship, to look and wonder.

It was such a crowd of sight-seers that witnessed what was, for most of them, the last and most wonderful (and most dreadful) sight of all. It is not hard for us to reconstruct from the stories of the few survivors what happened. It is easy for us to visualize the scene—it could be, save for a few differences, a crowded beach on Earth.

The younger people are, except for their respirators, in a state of sun-tanned nudity, and some few of them have even ventured into the still icy waters, where they are playing and splashing. The older folk are wearing either brightly colored costumes or the equally colorful coveralls of their Guilds. There are, of course, no stalls, no vendors of cold drinks and foods. There are no pleasure craft, great or small, on the blue water—but the white bergs along the horizons could well be white sails. And the sand is sand, and there is the usual debris of half-dried weed and the broken shells of molluscs between high and low water marks, and there is the usual smell of marine decay that is never like the smell of decay at all but clean and sharp in the nostrils.

It is easy to imagine the excitement that swept the beach when the big, dark shape appeared, rising and falling above the low waves a mile or so offshore. None of those there had any doubt as to what it was. This was the first time that they had ever had a sea of their own, but they had read about the seas of Earth in every available book on the subject. It was, they all knew, a whale.

There was an airship drifting lazily overhead. Its pilot, ironically enough, was Charles Willis—that same Charles Willis who was Farson's Navigator in *Star of Hope* and who, in his ice cavern in the first of the ice planetoids, had speculated on the possibility of the existence of whales in the frozen mass beneath his feet. This much is known: He was in radio touch with Port Obolensky and mystified the duty operator by bawling into his microphone, "There she blows!"

He valved hydrogen and dipped, circling the spot where the thing had first appeared. Its second appearance was closer inshore. Willis followed it. Suddenly, from what looked to the watchers ashore like a dorsal fin, there was an intense flicker of light that leapt up to embrace the airship. For long seconds—or so it seemed—the aircraft was outlined in pale fire. Then there was only a handful of glowing ashes falling towards the surface of the suddenly hostile sea.

Incredibly, the people remain-

ed where they were, watching. They must have refused to believe what they had seen. They were still there, most of them, when the thing waddled ashore, heaving itself out of the water and up the beach on caterpillar tracks. That was when the panic started—but it was too late. The same fire that had destroyed the airship licked out and devoured most of the watchers on the beach.

Two tractors got away. They had the legs of the thing from the sea, but no defense against its armament. One of them made skilful use of the cover afforded by dunes and got back to Marsopolis. The other one relied on speed and ran in a straight line. It did not run very far.

And Meyer, when his reconnaissance aircraft had confirmed the truth of the wild story told by the occupants of the lucky tractor, prepared to fight the second—and last—war of his career.

The following recorded conversation is of interest. Why and how this tape came to be saved is a mystery—but people running from a burning house save the most fantastic and incongruous objects.

Meyer (shouting furiously): You brought the horrifying thing here, Farson! How shall we deal with it?

Farson (coldly): You could try shouting at it the same as you've been shouting at me.

Marin (even more coldly):

There is no need for either of you to be so childish. Suppose we try to make up our minds as to just what we're up against. Once we have done that we can work out a way of dealing with it.

Meyer: You hope

Marin: I hope. First of all—the thing is obviously a machine. Probably there are intelligent beings inside it.

Meyer: Why "probably"? "Certainly," I'd have thought.

Farson: In the Final War on Earth there were robot weapons.

Marin: That's my point. This thing may be a robot weapon. It's obvious now what happened to the old fifth planet—they had a final war, the same as we did, and made an even better job of destroying their world.

Meyer: Well, what do we do about it?

Farson: Working on the assumption that there are intelligent beings inside the . . . the submarine, we could try to parley.

Meyer: We have tried. We're running short of white flags and volunteers.

A Voice: General! Three more of the things have crawled out of the sea!

Meyer (irritably): All right, all right. (To Marin) You're the scientist, Sandra. How do we convince these beings that we're friendly? After all, they should realize that they're in debt to us.

Marin: I'm a biologist, Carl, not a psychologist. Besides—as I said, those things may be no

more than semi-intelligent fighting machines.

Farson: And even if they have got human crews . . . Or organic crews . . . Even then they may be no more than semi-intelligent machines.

Meyer: What do you mean?

Farson: This, Carl. Those things, or people, have been dead to all intents and purposes for a long time. In those millions of years their brains may have deteriorated, or their minds. (I'm even less of a psychologist than Sandra is!) When their world was blown up, when they lost consciousness, they were all keyed up to kill or be killed. It could be that this resolve is all that remains of their intelligence. Not a pleasant consideration, but a very possible one.

Marin: And here's another point, Carl. This odd combination craft of theirs, this hybrid between a tank and a submarine. Maybe it's not a hybrid at all . . .

Meyer: What do you mean?

Marin: Maybe there were two separate and distinct races on the fifth planet. We know that there were land dwellers—we saw the ruins of their houses, the wreckage of their aircraft. There may have been sea dwellers, too. Those things may be, as it were, submarines in reverse, machines in which beings of the deep sea can come ashore to fight their enemies on land. In which case they will regard all land dwellers as their enemies.

Meyer: What is this weapon of theirs?

Farson: You're the military expert, Carl.

Marin: It's an atomic weapon of some sort.

Meyer: I know that.

A Voice: Only two of the airships have returned, General! The others have been destroyed.

Meyer: Did they do any damage to the enemy?

A Voice: No.

Meyer: Stay here, you two. I'm going to question the pilots.

Marin: I can't help feeling that this is our fault, Roy.

Farson: Nonsense, Sandra. We're all in this—every man and woman on Mars. We wanted a sea, and we got it, even though we did get rather more than we bargained for. And suppose this is the end . . . All we've done is hastened it by a few years.

Marin: But it was my idea in the first place.

Farson: Without Carl's political and military skill and my astronautics we'd have got no place.

Marin: I suppose not.

Farson: The trouble is that we've got no place to go now. I suppose we could reach the Jovian satellites—but we could never colonize them. And Venus is an even more impossible desert for our kind of life than Mars ever was.

Marin: What about Earth?

Farson: It's a long way to go just to die of radiation poisoning at the end of it.

Marin: I'm not so sure. I saw Levinsky, you know, when we got back from the Belt.

Farson: Levinsky? What the hell has he to do with this mess?

Meyer: They laugh at bombs. The only thing that seems to stop them is when the bearings of their tracks get clogged with sand—and that was all the good the bombing did. They have some means of clearing the tracks from the inside. A jet of compressed air, perhaps . . . Well, have you decided anything?

Marin: Yes. Six ships brought the original colonists here. They were packed like sardines and doped with lethegin. We have only five ships now, but our numbers are less. We still have supplies of lethegin . . .

Meyer: You mean . . . ?

Marin: Evacuate.

Farson: But . . .

Meyer: Try to be realistic.

Marin: I am. I told you, Roy, I saw Levinsky . . .

Farson: *Damn* Levinsky!

A Voice: General! The First Tractor Squadron is ready!

Meyer: Good. (To Farson and Marin, with a strong note of appeal in his voice) I'm relying on you, Sandra, and you, Roy, to find some way of dealing with these things.

Marin: I've already told you. Evacuate.

Meyer: We can't. Even if there was some place to go to, we can't give up *everything*.

The record breaks off there. Farson and Sandra Marin must have carried on their conversation in another room. Meanwhile, the First Armed Tractor Squad-

ron was flung into the path of the invaders. Meyer himself was in command. He seems to have fought the action with skill, taking full advantage of the cover of dunes, scattering land mines in the path of the things from the sea. Surviving accounts of the action are confused, but agree on one point. Twice the things from the sea were halted—on each occasion one of the alien machines was overset by an explosion and the advance was delayed while its mates butted and prodded it into an upright position. Throughout the running fight, however, their armor was impervious to Meyer's fire—and Meyer's armor was no protection against whatever weapon the aliens were using. Whenever a target presented itself the pale, flickering fire would lash out, and the unfortunate tractor and its crew would be no more than a scattered handful of briefly glowing dust on the red dust of the desert.

Meyer, with two-thirds of the squadron destroyed, ran for Marsopolis. He called out all available crews and tractors to sow the approaches of the city thick with mines. When the work of defense was well under way he stormed in to see Farson and Marin. He demanded that Farson take the shuttles up at once to the ships to strip them of their reactors. He was convinced that only atomic weapons would be of use against the enemy. He had, even, some crazy, impractical scheme for the mounting of

entire drive units on tractors to be used as mobile ray projectors. There is, of course, just a chance that it may have worked. There is the certainty that if it had been attempted the Return would never have taken place.

But—"Evacuate!" said Sandra Marin.

"Evacuate!" said Roy Farson. "Call in the tractors, the airships. Load them with people and supplies, and get them to Port Obolensky without delay. The shuttles are ready. Dimpleby has already sent a working party out to the ships."

"By whose orders?" stormed Meyer.

"By my orders, Carl. Believe me, I hate this as much as you do. We were all of us born here, and this is our world. We've worked to make it a place where we can live. But . . . Look at it this way. After all these centuries we're going home."

"Home? Are you crazy? This is home."

"It was never a real home," said Sandra softly.

They were interrupted by the arrival of messages from the reconnaissance airships. It seemed at first that the minefields had played their part. A vast area of desert was obscured by smoke and dust, and of the invaders there was no sign. Faintly, those in Meyer's office could hear the cheering as the citizens of Marsopolis celebrated. There was a gradual cessation of the cheering as the contents of the second message were circulated.

It read: "Enemy apparently undamaged, and using weapon to detonate minefields in their path."

"We haven't much time," Farson insisted. "If you delay any longer there will be no time."

"I," said Meyer, "have no intention of running."

"Then I will give the orders," said Farson. "After all, I am second in command, and in supreme command so far as astronomical matters are concerned."

Meyer pulled his pistol then, and there is little doubt that he would have used it. He forgot that Sandra was standing behind him. She picked up a heavy paperweight from the desk—it was, as a matter of fact, a curiously marked stone that she had brought back from one of the ice planetoids—and hit him, hard at the back of the head. He fell heavily to the floor.

Farson had picked up the telephone and was barking orders. "Commodore Farson here. Recall all tractors. Recall all airships excepting *Mayfly* and *Midge*, who are to maintain observation of invaders. Put plans for evacuation of city into effect immediately."

"What about Carl?" asked Sandra.

"Tie him up. Gag him. Keep him out of sight. We shall be the last to leave. We'll take him with us then."

Luckily the advance of the aliens was not fast. They halted for a long time at one of the

"canals." As far as those in the airships could see they were sucking up water from the subterranean stream through long pipes. *Mayfly*, assuming that the attention of the crews of the machines would be fully occupied, went in to bomb. *Mayfly*, with her people, ceased to exist.

And through the airlock door poured the tractors—a growling, snarling stampede of machines. Fully loaded they were with men and women, the pitifully small number of children. There were the animals, too—the twelve pigs from which our present herds are descended, the six ancestral rabbits whose numerous progeny provide us with an alternative meat supply, the twenty odd cats whose offspring have no function but to look ornamental. There were the bundles of household possessions, most of which had to be left at Port Obolensky. There were books. There was a haphazard selection of official records.

Marin and Farson rode in the last tractor. Meyer—ungagged now, unbound—was with them. The story is that he ordered the tractor crew to overpower the Commodore and his wife—but all six of them were spacemen and women who had been on the expedition to the Belt. Meyer blustered. He pleaded. He lapsed at last into a sullen silence.

When they arrived at Port Obolensky the first of the shuttles had already blasted off—and, according to the radio reports from *Midge*, the aliens

were in the city. It is probable that they assumed, from past experience of the wars on their own planet, that there were pockets of resistance to be dealt with and they wasted time prowling through the streets and investigating the houses. One can imagine them emerging from their landships encased in bulky suits holding water instead of air—but this is pure supposition. We know nothing at all about them. Marin's theory that they were dwellers in the deep seas of their own world seems to fit the facts of the case—but we do not know.

We do know that, at least in the initial stages, the evacuation went remarkably smoothly. The air was filled with the roar of the shuttles, and their wakes were pillars of cloud by day and pillars of fire by night. We know that Farson cursed the unavoidable display; a providential gale had wiped the desert clean of all traces of the exodus from the city, but the vapor trails and the fiery columns and the man-made thunders were a beacon to the invaders. In a matter of minutes they would be closing in.

He was not surprised when *Gnat*, who had relieved *Midge*, reported that the enemy machines had left Marsopolis and, without hesitation, had set their course for the spaceport.

The accent now was on people rather than things. Household effects and clothing would have to be abandoned. Records would have to be left. Every rocket

must be packed to capacity with people, people, people.

It was at this time that Meyer was given his freedom. The evacuation was too far under way for him to attempt to stop it. The stories tell of a little man, shrunken inside his flamboyant uniform, who wandered about the spaceport like a lost child, ignored by the busy crowds who were loading and dispatching the rockets.

And then, at the finish, the run of good luck came to an end. Only two more rocket loads would complete the evacuation—and the last two rockets had both developed engine defects in their descent through the atmosphere. They had both landed without crashing—but the credit for this goes to the pilots rather than to the machines. The defects were not serious—a choked feedline, a malfunctioning fuel pump. Dimbleby asked for an hour for the repairs. *Midge* reported that at their present rate of advance the aliens would be at *Port Obolensky* in forty-five minutes. There was no time to call relief rockets down from the big ships' orbit.

Meyer stood listening while Farson, Sandra Marin and Dimbleby discussed the situation. Let Sandra Marin tell what happened in her own words:

Poor old Dimbleby was almost in tears, she writes. "I can't let them go the way they are," he said. "They'd never make it. I must have the time, Sandra. I must."

"You shall have it," Carl said, surprising all of us. "I promise you that." There was a return of the old bombast in his use of the word "I." He turned to me. "But, first of all, I want to know why you and Roy have decided to return to Earth."

I had the photographs with me. I showed them to him.

"These," I said, "are photographs of the big terrestrial globe in the Institute. And *these* are photographs of Earth as she really is. We took them from *Star of Hope's* observatory on the voyage back from the Belt." I pointed at the hemispheres on his epaulettes. "Those are wrong. Those are Earth as she was. There has been a redistribution of land and water, and the chances are that the new lands are free from radio-activity."

"I see," he said. It should have been ludicrous when he tore the epaulettes from his uniform, but it wasn't. "To hell with Earth, anyhow. I'm a Martian." He started to bawl out in that huge voice of his. "I want twenty men! I want twenty good Martians! I want twenty good Martians who're willing to fight for their world!"

He got his twenty. He could have got four times that number. He could have got Roy and myself, but he accused us of trying to desert from our own Service and ordered us to the rockets during the onslaught.

The last account that we have of Meyer comes from one Will-

iam Riley, who was Engineer of *Midge*. He writes:

We hung there over the spaceport, our engines just turning over fast enough to hold us against the wind. Vanishing to leeward we could see the other airships; they had been abandoned when their crews were ordered into the shuttles. Over the northern horizon we could make out the cloud of red haze that warned of the aliens' advance. Below us Dimpleby and his crew were working frantically on the two remaining rockets. We knew what was happening, and were already discussing what to do in the event of the repairs not being completed on time. Ferranti, our Captain, said that we should take *Midge* down and carry off as many of the people as we could. The rest of us were in favor of attacking the aliens, although we knew that our bombs would be useless.

The loudspeaker of our radio crackled and then somebody—I think it was the Commodore—said, "*Midge*! Get clear of the blast-off zone!"

I increased revolutions and Ferranti took us a little way to the north. The blue-black, gleaming hulls of the invaders were over the horizon now. They were moving faster than any of us had ever seen them move. We lost sight of them when one of the minefields ahead of them went up—and then their blunt, ugly snouts pushed out from the dust and smoke as they kept on coming.

I turned to look as I heard the roar from the spaceport. One of the two grounded rockets was up—it was, we learned later, the one with the choked feedline. It lifted uncertainly and we were afraid that it was going to crash. But it lifted, and gathered speed, and in seconds vanished into the sky. Dimpleby's men were still working on the second one.

I looked to the north again—the invaders were getting close—then turned hurriedly as there was another roar from the port. For a horrible moment I thought that they'd repaired the second rocket and blasted off without us, abandoning us. But the rocket was still there. The noise came from the tractors—twenty of them. In ragged formation they were streaming out across the desert, towards the north. Our loudspeaker was yapping again. There was no mistaking the General's voice. He wanted to know the position of the enemy.

Ferranti answered, giving him the information.

He said, to us, "He's mad." We all of us thought the same. We all of us knew that the General's guns and rockets would be about as effective against the things' armor as snowflakes, and that their ray would turn him to dust before he got off more than a couple of rounds.

We thought that he was mad—but we were wrong. To begin with, he had the squadron creeping along at the lowest possible speed so that they proceeded

with the minimum dust. He led them to that hollow in which the Council's forces had been trapped—and I remembered *that* well enough, I was an engineer in one of the Police tractors! He halted them just below the crest of the ridge to the south of the basin. Through our glasses we could see two men getting out and crawling over the sand to the top of the slope where they lay motionless. They must have been the lookouts.

I could hear Ferranti talking over the radio, reporting the enemy's progress. I could see them myself, lurching over the dunes and slithering into the hollows, getting all the time closer to the ambush. Once the General's voice came over the speaker, "Lieutenant, look after yourself now. Get back to the spaceport."

"Not as long as I can be of use to you," replied Ferranti.

The things crawled up the last slope, started to slide down into the hollow in a great cloud of dust. The two lookouts got to their feet, ran to their own tractors. The twenty of them started up and surged over the crest of the dune, charged down on the aliens. Five of them were destroyed before contact was made. We could hear the crash as the other fifteen of them hit. Three of the things were overturned, and another six tractors dissolved in flame. Then we couldn't see any more for the dust. We hung there, watching and hoping. Perhaps the things could be destroyed after all.

Then we saw them, crawling one by one out of the red haze that filled the basin, and we knew that the General was dead. We felt a little happier when we heard the message from the spaceport telling us to come in, that repairs were completed. We felt a little happier—but we agreed with Ferranti when he said, "We should have been down there . . ."

And that was the last day on Mars.

When the fleet blasted away from its orbit there were strange lights shining and moving around Syrtis Major, and more lights around Marsopolis and Port Obolensky. Those same lights have been observed over the years by the astronomers on Earth; we have not let the science of astronomy lapse as did the Martian colonists!

The Return was made without incident, other than the loss of one shuttle during the landing on Earth. As we have read in the histories, the process of re-adaptation was slow and painful, but it was made. Luckily machinery capable of being reconditioned was found on certain not too heavily contaminated islands that were all that remained of the old land masses, and luckily the new, mutated plants proved suitable food both for our ancestors and for their livestock. Then there is the sea, and all the good things in the sea.

Even now, we do not know what truth there was in Sandra

Marin's theory. One thing we do know—after the return to Earth there was a wave of fertility that has yet to diminish.

Marin, no doubt, would have carried out her researches to a conclusion. Unfortunately she and her husband were drowned while bathing from one of the beaches of New Atlantis.

There is so much that they could have told us—both of them. We know so little of the rise of the New Earth Party, so little of the events leading up to the expedition to the Asteroid Belt, so little of the final, disastrous war against the things from the frozen seas, so little about the things themselves.

Such knowledge would be invaluable now that we are considering the recolonization of Mars; in another generation the mounting pressure of population will

be a serious problem. Our physicists tell us that they have discovered the nature of the aliens' weapon and have devised a defense against it. Or it may be that the aliens themselves, by this time, are faced with similar problems and have turned covetous eyes upon our water-rich world.

It may be that the Revelationists are right in their contention that all evil things come from the oceans, and that the New Earth Party tampered with the destiny of the race by the bringing of seas to Mars. It may be that only by migration to almost waterless Venus will Man be saved. The verse upon which they base their doctrine is apt enough: *And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away, and there was no more sea.* **THE END**

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